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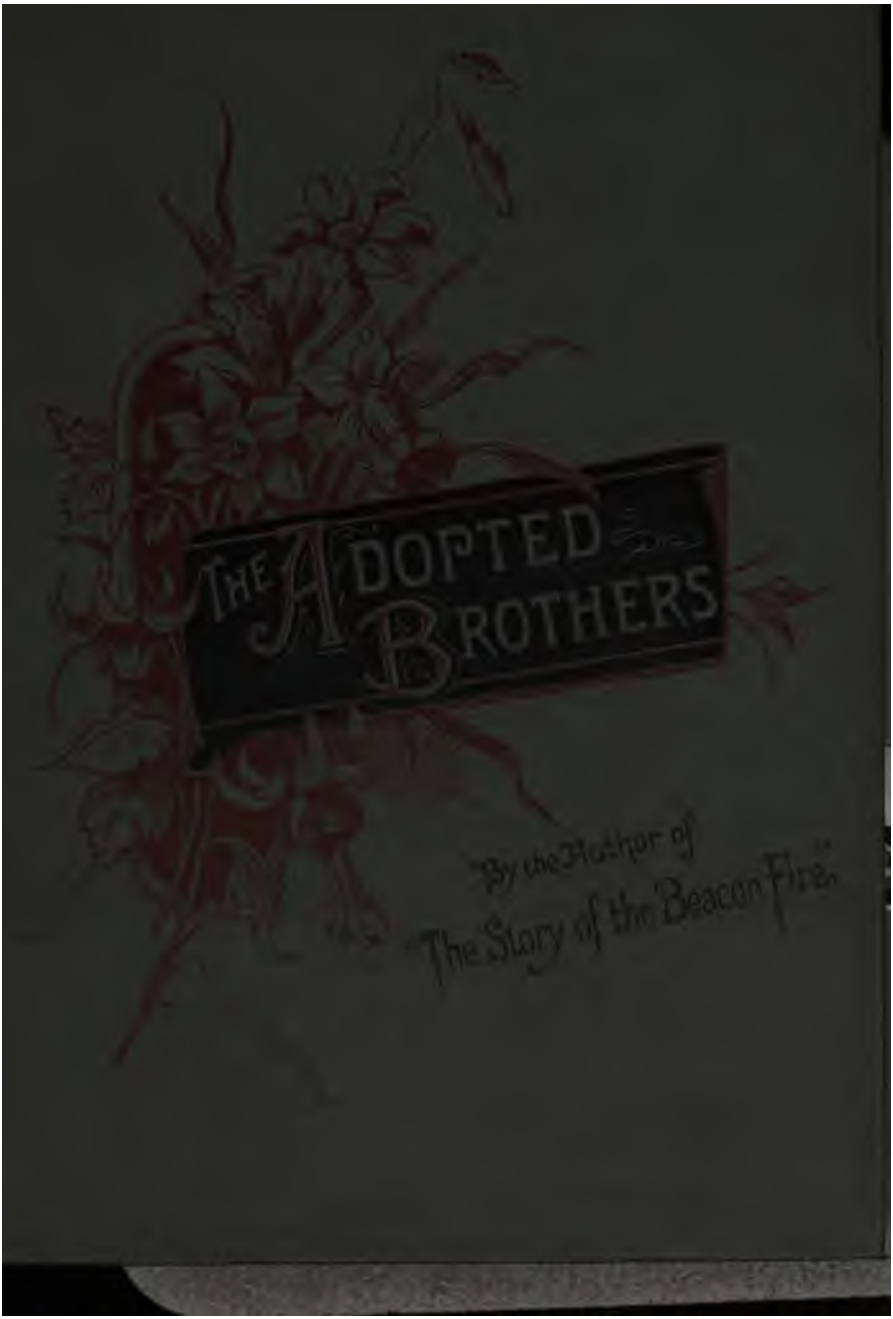
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THE ADOPTED BROTHERS
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THE

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WILLIE'S RASH ACT.

*Page 62.*

**Thomas Nelson and Sons,**
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1889


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THE

# ADOPTED BROTHERS;

OR,

## "Blessed are the Peacemakers."

*By*

*M. E. CLEMENTS,*

*Author of "The Story of the Beacon Fire," "Bible Stories," &c. &c.*

London:

T. NELSON AND SONS, PATERNOSTER ROW.

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# Contents.


I. DAY-DREAMS, ... ... ... ... ... ... 7

II. NEW PROSPECTS, ... ... ... ... ... 13

III. THE SOWING OF STRIFE, ... ... ... ... 21

IV. THE STRIFE BEGUN, ... ... ... ... ... 29

V. HOW MRS. DICKSON'S WORDS CAME TRUE, ... ... 43

VI. BANISHED FROM HOME, ... ... ... ... 56

VII. DARK HOURS, ... ... ... ... ... 68

VIII. ANXIOUS SEARCHING, ... ... ... ... ... 80

IX. THE SOWING OF PEACE, ... ... ... ... 93

X. PEACE ESTABLISHED, ... ... ... ... ... 106

XI. SEVEN YEARS LATER, ... ... ... ... ... 114

# THE ADOPTED BROTHERS.

## CHAPTER I.

### DAY-DREAMS.

WILLIE WITHERS had everything an indulgent father could give him, but he had no playfellow. I was going to say he had everything a boy could desire, but on second thoughts I will not say so; because that which makes the great joy and comfort of a child's life Willie had missed. He had lost his mother before he could remember, and no one could ever give him a mother again.

Willie was his father's only child, and Mr. Withers's greatest pleasure was to see his boy healthy and happy and good, and he did all in his power to secure those ends.

And so Willie grew tall and strong, pleasant to look at, as a bright, healthy boy is sure to be, and most of his time he was happy. As for the goodness, he was neither better nor worse than other carefully brought up boys of his age. There was

nothing particularly angelic about him, neither was he by any means a habitually naughty boy. He loved and honoured his father with all his loyal little heart, and he had been taught to obey him. He was truthful and honourable, for he had never known anything about people who were otherwise. He was generally fairly respectful and obedient to Mrs. Dickson, who had been his first teacher, and who was still the general manager of Mr. Withers's household.

Since he had grown older he had his lessons with a visiting tutor; and he certainly took a good deal of pains with them—not that he had any particular love for that kind of work, but because he knew that his father would be displeased if he neglected them, and besides he stood in a good deal of awe of Mr. Gray. But on the whole he took more interest in riding his pony, and feeding his pigeons, and romping with a great bloodhound that looked fierce and terrible, but was really as gentle as a lamb.

And when Willie was in the house he liked to read story-books and to paint pictures. I am not blaming him for all this, for he was only ten years old when my story begins, and a boy is but a boy after all, and it is not every one who is born with a love for the multiplication table, though that is a very useful piece of knowledge, and we ought to be very much obliged to the people who have made us learn it.

But when he was about ten years old Willie

began really to feel the want of a boy-companion. He thought it would make lessons less dull and play more enjoyable if there were some one to share them; and in this he was not far wrong.

He used to have queer day-dreams about this boy-companion that he longed for so much, although he never told them to any one. People don't talk about their day-dreams, you know—at least children don't talk about them to grown-up people; but I rather think that when two boys who are great friends go sauntering about with their arms twined together, they sometimes confide to each other what things they should *very, very* much like should happen; and I have a notion that two girls often do the same.

Now, as I was telling you, Willie Withers kept his day-dreams shut up within his own little soul; but as people who write stories know all about everybody's thoughts, I can give you an idea of some of them.

There were autumn days when nuts were dropping from the hazel trees in the wood, and crisp brown leaves rustled beneath the feet on shrubbery paths where Willie wandered about a great part of the afternoon. And on those days, when the boy had grown tired of romping with Major, and tired of gathering nuts and blackberries that there was no one to share, he would fall into thought, and Major, stalking solemnly after him, looked as if he were thinking too.

On these occasions Willie would call to mind all

that he had ever heard of children getting lost in great forests, and he thought how nice it would be to find a boy who had got lost: how he would bring him home and feed him—for, of course, the boy would be faint with hunger—and how it should turn out that he was an orphan who had run away from a cruel master; and how he, Willie, would get his father to keep him, and what a nice boy he would be, and what a capital playfellow.

And then again there were winter evenings when Willie strayed into the warm, snug library, before the lamps were lighted, to wait until his father should come home at dinner-time. And there he would curl himself up in a deep chair in the firelight and think, while the rain dashed at intervals against the window panes, and the wind rose in gusts which swayed and bent the great trees in the darkness outside. On these evenings he would be sure to think of storms and shipwrecks, and of all the stories he had ever read about shipwrecked children cast up by the sea on strange coasts. And as of all times for dreaming that idle hour on winter evenings, when there are wind and rain and darkness outside, and warmth and flickering firelight within, is the very dreamiest, so on these occasions Willie's fancies sometimes became so distinct that he almost *expected* that some evening his father would be much later than usual; and just as every one in the house was getting anxious and uneasy he would arrive, carrying in his arms a half-drowned little foreigner, who had lost all his relations in a terrible

shipwreck, and this boy should become his adopted brother, his playmate and his devoted friend.

Considering how highly improbable it was that any of these things should ever happen, I think it is not surprising that Willie never told Mrs. Dickson about them. But if any of you think he was a very silly boy to indulge at all in such fancies, all I can say is, that any boy or girl who has never in all their life had a day-dream of any kind, is quite at liberty to shut up this book and never read another word about Willie Withers.

Autumn days passed, however, and the short winter days passed too, and no playmate came for Willie.

At Christmas his cousin Geoffrey came for a visit, as he had done every Christmas and midsummer since Willie could remember. Geoffrey Withers was the nearest thing that he had ever known to a boy-friend; and although Geoffrey had been quite a big boy when Willie was still in petticoats, he had always been extremely good-natured to his little cousin. It was Geoffrey who had taught him to ride. In winter he took him out skating, and in summer he taught him to swim; for Mr. Withers had such confidence in his nephew that he would allow Willie to go everywhere with him. Of course Willie considered his big cousin a hero and a model. He always intended that when he should be big enough he would do just as Geoffrey did; and this was really not a bad idea, for Geoffrey Withers was as noble-minded, as kind-hearted, and as brave a

young gentleman as ever grew up to be the captain of his school.

But this year Geoffrey had left school, and he was now a student of Cambridge—a step which removed him further than ever from Willie's boy-world. Not that he was less good-natured than before, for many a happy hour did the little fellow spend with him upon the ice that winter, trying his best to skate like him. And very delighted he felt when he saw how people turned to watch the young man's graceful performances. I think he would have liked to have followed him, blowing a trumpet and proclaiming, "This is Mr. Geoffrey Withers, papa's nephew and my friend, scholar of Cambridge and ex-captain of Ascham Hall School, the best skater on the ice this year, and altogether the handsomest, cleverest, strongest, and most delightful fellow in the world!"

Geoffrey's visit, however, soon came to an end, and Willie saw him return to his college with a kind of lonely feeling that his cousin was now quite a man.

## CHAPTER II.

### NEW PROSPECTS.

WHEN spring came on that year, Mr. Withers began to leave home more frequently than he had ever done before; and though he did not stay away long at a time, the days of his absence seemed to Willie duller and more lonely than they had been on any former occasion. One day in February, when Mr. Withers had been absent for a whole week, and no word had as yet come of his return, Willie was wandering disconsolately down the shrubbery path. From the sheltered border gay little crocuses looked up at him laughingly, and clumps of snowdrops drooped their pure blossoms with a shy gentle smile, while from shady corners among the shrubs white and blue violets sent out their perfume. It was as bright and cheery a day as early spring can give us, and little birds, busy at their nest-building, made the air gay with their happy twitterings. Yet Willie felt as near as possible to being downright sad. He had hardly remembered ever before having his heart so near the heels of his boots.

Mrs. Dickson, observing how silent he was at his dinner-time, had kindly offered to send him out for a ride with the groom; but it was just the kind of day on which his father used to take him off to Sunny-cove for a canter on the sands, and he had a queer sort of feeling that he would rather not go with any one else just then. So he declined the offer; and Mrs. Dickson, not being a writer of stories, could not tell at all what was in his thoughts. She believed he was sulky, and wondered if he was going to turn out a bad-tempered boy after all. But she prudently said nothing, and after dinner he strolled off with Major, who often seemed to understand him better than any one else did. So he kept his hand resting on the big dog's head, and whenever he heaved a deep sigh, without in the least knowing why he did it, Major sighed too for just the same reason.

In the midst of all this dolefulness, Jennie the housemaid came running down the walk.

"Master Willie," she cried, "Mrs. Dickson wants you. She's got something to tell that you'll be right glad to hear."

Willie's face shortened by an inch, and he ran at once to the house, while Major trotted after him, his ears and tail saying quite plainly that life had now some interest for him too.

"Willie, my dear," said Mrs. Dickson, when he had reached her, "here's a telegram from your papa. He will be home to-day."

Willie felt a great deal too glad to say it; he

only cut a little caper, and then threw his arms round Major, who licked his face in a manner which conveyed, "I know all about it, my dear, and I congratulate you."

"May I go to meet papa, Mrs. Dickson? What train is he coming by?"

"My dear, you would not be in time; he is posting on from Marshton. I wish I had known it before John went to market, for really I don't know what I am to order for his dinner."

And away went the careful lady to consult with cook, while Willie, having, I am afraid, but little feeling for her difficulties, went to watch for the fly.

Before long it arrived, and when Mr. Withers held his son for a moment in his arms, it seemed to the boy that it was with a closer pressure than usual, and that there was a special tenderness in his greeting, as if he quite knew how very lonely his child had been without him.

After that, Willie did not see his father again till dinner-hour, for Mr. Withers was busy with letters and papers which had to go back to Marshton by the driver of the fly. So the boy went off contentedly to get his lessons learned. Everything was brighter and happier now that his father was at home.

During dinner Willie, who had himself dined at one o'clock, came and sat at the table all the time, and in due course was liberally helped to pudding and fruit. After that, father and son went together into the snug library; and the boy drew a low seat

to his father's side, and settled himself for a quiet, cozy hour.

They often sat thus in the evening, sometimes each engaged with a separate book; and then, though they talked but little, they still had a pleasure in being together. But sometimes Mr. Withers read to his boy, and often he would talk to him, and answer his numerous questions. On this evening he did not take up a book, and Willie was glad to see that he was preparing to talk.

"Well, my little man," he said, laying his hand tenderly on the boy's bright head, "have you missed your father this time?"

Willie looked up with a quick answering smile, but he said only, "Yes."

"Are you lonely here, my boy?"

"I am sometimes, papa, but not much when you are at home."

"Would you like to go to school?"

"Oh no, papa, not for a long time yet," said Willie, a little alarmed, although he did not think the proposal was seriously made. He had always heard that at thirteen years old he should go to Ascham Hall School, where Geoffrey had been educated, and he had no wish to leave home sooner.

"No? Well, perhaps we can do better than that. How would you like to have another boy in the house to share your lessons and to play with you?"

"O papa!" said Willie, his face flushing with pleasure as he looked earnestly at his father, "do you really mean *that?*"

"I do."

"O papa, how did you know, how *could* you know, that I was always wishing for a boy-friend?"

"Were you? You did not tell me. But perhaps I guessed something of it, for I have been often lonely myself."

"You, papa?"

"Yes, dear. But I hope that neither of us will be so much alone in future. Hand me that morocco case, Will."

The case was brought, and Mr. Withers took out two photographic portraits. The first he showed Willie was of a pretty boy about his own age, but much less robust-looking than himself.

"Would that boy do for a friend, Will?"

Willie felt that this was the very boy. He had always thought of the friend he would like to have as a boy either a little younger than himself, or one who was less active and less accustomed to country pleasures than he was. He would like to teach his playmate all that he himself had learned from Geoffrey.

"Papa, who is he, and is he really coming here?"

"His name is Vincent Fitzmaurice, and I hope he will come here before very long."

"How old is he?"

"Ten years; a few months younger than you are. Now I want to show you another portrait. This is some one that I am fond of, and I hope you will like her too."

"She is a pretty lady, papa; isn't she?" said

Willie. But he felt more interest in the first portrait.

"I think she is pretty, and, what is better, she is good."

"Is that the reason you are fond of her, papa? What is her name? Is she fond of you too?"

"You ask a great many questions together," said Mr. Withers, smiling and becoming rather red. "The lady is Mrs. Fitzmaurice; she is Vincent's mother; and I think she must be fond of me, Will, for she has promised to be my wife. She will be Mrs. Withers then, you know; and she will stay here with us always and be the mistress of the house, and her little son will be your friend and playmate."

This was all very new and surprising. Willie could hardly understand the arrangement at first. He knew that his mother, whom he had never seen, had been Mrs. Withers, and the old servants still spoke of her as "the mistress;" but he never thought any one else could be Mrs. Withers and the mistress. He stood silent, gazing into the fire and trying to understand.

"Papa," he said at last, "will Vincent Fitzmaurice be my brother then? Can any one be my brother ever that wasn't always my brother?"

"He will not be your brother exactly, though you may be quite like brothers. He will be my stepson, you know. His own father died about three years ago; so I must provide for him, and see that he is properly educated, just as I do for you. And I know his mother will be good to my boy."

The more Willie got accustomed to the idea the more he liked it; and now he began to ask a great many questions about the Fitzmaurices, more, however, as to the boy who was to be a sort of brother to him than as to the lady who was to be his step-mother.

When he had found out that Vincent was the son of a military officer, and that he had been born in India, and had lived there until he was seven years old, and that he was a small, slight boy, and rather clever, and apt to say very droll things, and that he was about as good as most boys, Mr. Withers declared he could not possibly tell any more about him. Willie must learn the rest from Vincent himself.

"But, Will," he said, "you are thinking only about your own companion; you have never said whether you are glad that I shall have some one to be with me."

"Yes, papa, I am glad indeed; but you see I never knew that you were lonely, you never told me."

"And *you* never told *me*. Now, my son, I think it is time for you to go to bed and dream about Vincent."

"Yes, papa; but does Mrs. Dickson know about this lady that is going to marry you?"

"Yes, dear; I have told her."

"And will Mrs. Dickson stay here still, papa?"

"I think not, dear. Mrs. Dickson has been very good to you, and she has taken care of the house

very nicely for us; but I don't think she would like to stay here when another lady will be mistress of the house."

"And where will she go, papa?"

"I think she will go to be governess to some little girls who live in Marshton; so I can take you to see her sometimes."

"I am glad of that. I should not like never to see her again. Good-night, papa."

## CHAPTER III.

### THE SOWING OF STRIFE.

THE next morning Willie awoke with his mind full of the changes which were to take place in his home, but especially of the long-desired companion who had at last been promised to himself. He soon found that Mrs. Dickson's view of this matter differed very widely from his own.

Now, Mrs. Dickson, like a great many other people who mean well, did not always do and say just the wisest thing that could be done and said. She was very fond of Willie, and would often take a great deal of trouble to give him pleasure; but if she had had quite her own way, she would certainly have spoiled him.

She was a woman who often spoke hastily and thoughtlessly, not considering that words are something more than mere empty sounds—that they can cheer, or hurt, or instruct; that they can make peace or stir up strife. Indeed, I am afraid Mrs. Dickson was not given to considering anything very deeply.

She was vexed now, because she must leave a situation in which she had been happy and comfortable for one which was new and strange. This was natural enough; but certainly there was neither sense nor justice in being angry, not only with the lady whom Mr. Withers was about to marry, but also with that lady's son. But Mrs. Dickson was one of those people who pride themselves on being able, at first sight, to form a true opinion of a stranger's character; and on this occasion she excelled herself, for she formed her opinion of Vincent Fitzmaurice without ever having seen him at all. She felt sure that he was not only a very selfish boy, who would always contrive in some mean way to get for himself the larger share of the good things that had hitherto belonged to her pet Willie, but also a very artful one, who would be likely to tell stories of him to his father, and make no end of mischief. Vincent's mother, of course, would always take her own son's part, and Mr. Withers would naturally be guided by his wife's opinion; so that, according to Mrs. Dickson, Willie was likely to have rather a bad time of it.

Thus it was that when Willie began to talk to her rapturously about his future playmate, and to explain how very delightful everything was going to be, she looked very grave, sighed, and said, "I hope so, dearie."

Of course you all know there is a way of saying "I hope so" which is just the same as if you said, "I doubt it." Mrs. Dickson said no more at that

time, for she had no *intention* of making mischief; but from those three words sprang the small beginning of a dark cloud which before long overspread all the sunny sky of Willie's hopes and anticipations. From that moment a shadow of suspicion and distrust crept into all his thoughts of his adopted brother, and he was no longer ready to meet him with the frank and unreserved welcome that he had been preparing for him.

There were but a few weeks to elapse before the day appointed for Mr. Withers's marriage, and during those weeks his time was so much occupied with business that he had not many hours free to spend with his boy. Whenever he could, he took him out with him in the afternoons to ride or drive, and sometimes they sat together in the evening. Once or twice it struck him as being rather strange that Willie had never since the first evening asked him any more questions about the Fitzmaurices, nor made any allusion to the pleasure with which he looked forward to meeting his adopted brother; but the boy's satisfaction with the prospect when first it was opened to him had been so evident that his father never thought he could be coming to regard it with dislike.

Such, however, was the fact. Thrown more than ever with Mrs. Dickson, and with less of his father's society to counteract her influence, Willie was day by day imbibing that lady's prejudices against the son of his future stepmother, and learning to look forward with dread to his arrival as to

a time when some kind of separation must set in between himself and his father. Not that Mrs. Dickson ever told him so directly; but she believed it herself, and these were the kind of hints which conveyed the impression of it to Willie.

When preparing one day to set out for his afternoon ride, under the care of the groom, he happened to remark that rides were never so nice as when papa was with him. Mrs. Dickson replied, "My dear child, you must learn to enjoy yourself without having your papa always with you. When Mrs. Withers comes, he will of course wish to take her for a drive in the afternoons. You must not expect that he will often go with *you* in the future."

Again, when the boy was talking gaily of some pleasures which he looked forward to sharing with his stepmother's son, and picturing to himself Vincent's enjoyment of delights which must be new to him, Mrs. Dickson thought it necessary to warn him by saying, "Take care, my dear, that Master Fitzmaurice does not get the lion's share."

"But, Mrs. Dickson," said Willie innocently, "you don't want me to keep everything for myself, do you? You always told me I shouldn't."

"Certainly, my dear, I have always endeavoured to train you in the way you should go, and I hope you will profit by the pains I have taken with you; but I am not afraid that you will turn out selfish. Whatever your faults are, Willie, you always were a generous child; even when you were a baby in

arms you would offer to share your bread and milk. It was quite pretty to see you. But *every one* is not so unselfish as you are, child. There are many designing people in the world who are only too ready to take advantage of those who are generous and unsuspecting. You will find out as you grow older that in this world people must learn to take care of 'number one.' I only wish I had found it out many years ago."

Such were some of the seeds which this thoughtless woman sowed in Willie's mind, seeds which quickly sprang up into the belief that in future his only chance of getting fair play in his father's house would be to look well to his rights and to hold his own with a firm hand. Poor Will! learning so early the detestable, the cruelly false doctrine that the wisest and happiest course in this world is to look sharply after one's own interests, and by all means to secure for oneself a full share of everything good and pleasant—the doctrine of taking "care of number one." And yet Willie read a chapter in the New Testament every morning to Mrs. Dickson!

Well would it have been for the boy if he could have spoken to his father of these feelings; but he was not given, except on very special occasions, to talk at all of what was deep down in his heart, and he was the less so now, because he knew that in this matter his father felt very differently from himself. He tried during the time they spent together to banish the darkened future altogether

from his thoughts; for he was beginning to have a desperate sort of feeling that he must make the most of what remained to him of his old life, and enjoy to the utmost those hours of companionship which he believed must soon pass away from him for ever. Never before had he realized how much he loved his father; and whenever he could he hung about him with a boy's unspoken tenderness, which found expression, not in words or caresses, but in a watching of his words and looks, and a ready performance of any little act which he believed would give pleasure.

And so Mr. Withers never guessed what was passing in the mind of his son. If he noticed the child's silence and dulness, it was to feel thankful that he would soon be able to give him a more cheerful home. If he felt touched—and he often did—by the dutiful love expressed in constant little acts of thoughtfulness, it was to say to himself with a deep satisfaction, "Dear little lad! who could help loving him? I may be proud of the stepson I have to present to my future wife: if he were an ill-mannered, undutiful boy, how I should feel ashamed of him."

And when, on the day before that appointed for his marriage, he started for the residence of his bride, as he bid his little son good-bye he said, "You must keep up your heart, my boy, and try not to be dull. In three weeks I will come back to you and bring you a mamma and a brother—two good things you have never known, my little lad."

But, alas! this thought had no pleasure for Willie now. The sower of strife had been at work, the whisperer who "separates very friends;" and so, instead of considering that he was about to gain new relations, he believed that he was losing his father.

When he returned to the house, he went straight to the library, and having locked the door, he threw himself upon the floor, with his head in his father's chair, and cried the bitter tears of a desolate-hearted child. Poor little lad, if he had only known that there was no reason for it at all!

The three weeks passed under the care of Mrs. Dickson, who did all she knew how to give her charge pleasure; but her manner showed so plainly that she pitied him, and considered him a very ill-used boy indeed, that she succeeded as nearly as possible in making him feel dull and sad almost the whole time. His lesson-hours were really the best part of those days; for as Mr. Gray was not a man to put up with wandering attention or ill-prepared work, Willie was obliged while with him to forget impending troubles, which Mrs. Dickson some way or other managed to connect with everything.

The day was appointed for Mr. and Mrs. Withers's return home from their wedding-tour. It had been arranged that Vincent Fitzmaurice should meet them on their way, and return with them to his new home, where they should arrive late in the afternoon.

Mrs. Dickson made her arrangements to leave on

the morning of the same day. As often happens when we are about to part with our friends, Willie now felt some regrets for certain little failures in his behaviour to his former governess during the years she had tended and taught him, and he thought he could best express this feeling by showing her some affectionate attention at parting. So after much consultation with Jennie as to what would be the most suitable parting gift, he rode one day into the market town and bought a beautiful Shetland wool shawl; and on the morning of Mrs. Dickson's departure, having managed to cut a bouquet about the size of a very large head of cabbage, he shyly presented his two gifts just as she was ready to leave the house.

Tears filled the poor woman's eyes as she received this token of her beloved pupil's regard, and when she had driven away from the door she leaned back in the carriage and fairly sobbed for grief at parting with him. Perhaps her grief would have been deeper still could she have known what bitter trouble her thoughtlessness had prepared for the child whom she loved almost as if he were her own.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE STRIFE BEGUN.

In due time Mr. and Mrs. Withers arrived at home, and as Willie sprang to his father's arms for the usual greeting, in the joy of seeing him again he forgot for a moment the cloud that had been gathering over his soul.

He was then presented to his stepmother, and somewhat shyly, though not ungraciously, he received her kiss. It was not until he turned to the weary little Vincent, and extended to him a cold, unbrotherly hand, that the cloud settled down upon him again.

When the travellers had been refreshed with a cup of tea in the library, Mr. Withers said to his son,—

"You and Vincent must dine with us to-day. Take him to your room, Will, and see that he has all he wants. He is very tired."

Tired and dusty and tumbled the little fellow was, and as this was a state of affairs very distasteful to Master Fitzmaurice, he was also a little cross.

There was certainly nothing in his appearance at that moment calculated to win the heart of a person who had been prepared to dislike him.

Silently Willie led the way to the large cheerful bed-room which in future the two boys were to occupy together. Mrs. Withers's French maid was in the room before them, unpacking and arranging Vincent's clothes; and with some dismay, not unmixed with contempt, Willie observed that a good deal of assistance from her was required to accomplish that young gentleman's very elegant toilet. For the last two years Willie had been independent of such help: was he now to have a maid bothering about his room in this way?

"I wish I needn't go down to dinner," said Vincent as he took off his dusty garments; "I'm awfully tired, and one has to sit so long at evening dinner. Why didn't you get them to have a real jolly tea in the schoolroom for you and me?"

"I like dining late," said Willie a little shortly. He had always considered it a treat to dine with his father in the evening.

"I don't," said Vincent.

But as the disfigurements of the journey were removed, Vincent's habitual gay humour returned to him; and while his brown hair was being arranged in artistic waves over his white forehead, he fixed his eyes with a somewhat comical expression upon his new brother, until the latter coloured all over his sensitive face.

Willie was a shy boy, grave and silent in the

presence of strangers. Vincent was an officer's child, all his life in the habit of meeting a variety of people, and had not a particle of shyness in him. Full of gay drollery, he could utter his little jokes before a roomful of people, and when he was in good humour he never was long silent.

"Willie Withers, what sort of boy are you?" he asked at last.

"I don't know," said Willie bluntly, but with perfect sincerity; "you must find out for yourself."

"I wonder if you are cross," Vincent said meditatively, still fixing his eyes on the boy's flushed face. "You know I can never help plaguing cross people, they're *such* fun."

Willie said nothing, his feelings were unutterable.

"I like your father," Vincent went on; "he's jolly, and *he* isn't a bit cross. I used to try to get him to tell me what you were like, but he never would say much about you. He's awfully fond of you, I *know*, though he didn't say much. I always talk a lot about the people I like, but some people don't, you know; do you?"

"I don't know," said Willie; "I never thought about it." It did not quite agree with his notions of propriety to hear his father called "jolly," and he wondered what sort of terms this boy had already established with him.

"I'm glad your father's married mamma, you know; I shouldn't like her to have married a cross old fellow. I intend to call Tom Withers 'papa,' be-

cause I like him. Will you call your stepmoth
'mamma'?"

Tom Withers! what next? Had the boy a
sense of respect for any one? Very coldly Wil
replied, "I shall do whatever papa wishes. A
you nearly ready to come down?"

"Oh my! what a good boy! I'd advise yo
not to be always so good as that, or you'll get pu
in a story-book, you know, like boys that die o
being good. I'm just ready.—Florinne, will you
fasten my wrist-bands? Why didn't you get me
the other fasteners? Never mind, these will do
now.—There, I'm dressed. Come along, Willie."

"Dressed indeed!" thought Willie as he looked at the small figure, to all appearance full two years younger than his own, arrayed in black velvet with endless ruffles. Willie's own dinner dress—and he had donned his best for the reception of his stepmother—was a perfectly plain cloth suit; and though he felt some contempt for Vincent's decorations, there was yet something about the child that made him feel himself awkward and ungainly beside him. Throughout dinner, Vincent, though perfectly gentlemanlike in his deportment, seemed as much at home as if he had dined at that table every day of his life; while Willie, awed by the presence of a strange lady, spoke only when he was spoken to. Now and then his eyes met those of his father, and a little sympathetic smile passed between them, but that was all.

After dinner, when they all went into the draw-

ing-room, Vincent sprang upon Mr. Withers's knee, and began asking him funny little questions, which he answered good-humouredly. Then seeing his son standing aloof with downcast eyes, he extended his hand to him, and drew the boy to his old position close by his side.

Mrs. Withers played and sang for them, and presently she asked Willie whether he could sing.

"No, mamma," said Willie, bringing out the unfamiliar word with that kind of choky feeling which all shy people know about, and he glanced at his father to see whether he had answered rightly. A little nod reassured him.

"Would you like to hear Vincent sing?—Come here, Vincy."

Without the smallest embarrassment the child went forward and warbled away at a little French song, while his mother played the accompaniment.

When it was over, Mr. Withers, wishing to make the boys better acquainted, suggested that they should play a game of bagatelle.

"Oh no, thank you, papa," said Vincent; "I'm too tired to play to-night."

"I think, my boy," said his mother, "you had better go to bed.—You know he had a long journey to-day, Tom, before he met us."

"So he had. Good-night then, little lads; sleep well."

But Willie lingered. "Please, papa," he said in a low tone, "need I go just yet? I am not tired, you know."

"Yes, my son, go with Vincent; it would not be kind to let him go alone on his first night here." So Willie went.

"You don't want to come to bed now," said Vincent, as they were ascending the stairs; "why are you doing it?"

"Papa wished it," replied Willie.

"Oh, he said hardly anything about it. I can't think why you are so much afraid of your father, Willie."

"I'm not afraid of him."

"Aren't you? Any one would think you were. What would he do to you if you did not do exactly as he bid you?"

"I don't know. I never tried."

"Never! Well, I think you must be awfully afraid of him. Does he spank you badly?"

Willie was one of those children who regard bodily chastisement as the extreme penalty of domestic discipline; a fitting visitation, no doubt, for very serious offences, but one which, at his years, would be a disgrace scarcely to be survived. A hot, angry flush rose to his face as he indignantly replied, "He has never touched me since I can remember."

"Really! Then you needn't get cross about it. I can remember my papa used to spank me properly when I didn't do as I was bidden; so I thought, perhaps, people's fathers always did, you know. Mothers are different, of course."

Willie thought it very likely that the late Cap-

tain Fitzmaurice had needed thus to vindicate his outraged authority. But what sort of boy must this be, who not only could speak in this cold-blooded manner of a matter which to Willie would be an intolerable disgrace, but could bring in, in such a connection, the name of his dead father, whom he evidently remembered quite well? It was only on rare occasions, and then with a kind of reverential hush, that Willie ever alluded to the mother whom he had never seen. Vincent was indeed a boy so different from Willie, that even had they been far more favourably disposed, it would have been hard for them to understand each other at first.

The two boys were now to have all their lessons together, and on the day after his arrival Vincent was introduced to Mr. Gray. Willie had been indulging some secret satisfaction in the thought that his new companion's playful familiarity and somewhat provoking ease of manner must in this quarter certainly receive a check; for Mr. Gray was the last person in the world with whom Willie would have dreamt of taking liberties. He was a grave, reserved man, who, though never harsh or unjust to his pupils, had none of that ready sympathy with young people which often wins their regard for a less patient and painstaking teacher.

Vincent, however, on being presented to this walking iceberg, advanced and offered his hand with a frank, winning smile, which met with a more

genial response than Willie had ever yet received from his teacher. Most people who have the misfortune to have very cold manners are disposed to like those who are not chilled or repelled by them; and Mr. Gray was no exception. Promptly, and with perfect self-possession, the little lad answered questions concerning his attainments; and, behold, before lesson time was over, he was standing with his hand resting lightly on his teacher's shoulder, rapidly taking in explanations which Willie, seated at the other end of the table, was following laboriously, his attention in nowise helped by the astounding behaviour of his companion.

When Mr. Gray rose to go, Vincent volunteered to escort him to the gate; and off he went, hanging on that grave gentleman's arm, and chattering merrily.

Willie concluded that such a boy as this might be trusted to shift for himself; and remembering all the hints he had received about holding his own place in the house, he thought this would be a good opportunity of asserting his sole ownership of his beloved pony. So he resolved on doing what he had never done before in his life—to go off for his afternoon ride without telling any one where he was going.

There were certain places to which it was understood he might ride alone; but he had always been in the habit of first asking whether his father had any other plans for the afternoon, or getting his sanction for what he himself intended to do. Now,

however, he thought it likely that Mr. Withers would consider that Vincent should be invited to share in any pleasure which he was about to enjoy; and he dreaded to expose to his high-minded father the very ungenerous feelings which prompted his action. So he went his own way to the stable-yard, got Paddy saddled, and set off for the common, where he occasionally went for a canter.

Emerging from the enclosures of the home-grounds, he trotted briskly along the sunny lanes between hedges of budding hawthorn; and when he arrived at the common he galloped over the grass, till the overheated state of the pony warned him to draw bridle.

Yet it was not an enjoyable ride; there was a strange hard kind of feeling about his heart all the time. It seemed to him, as he ambled quietly homewards, in no hurry to arrive, that he had never had such an utterly lonely ride before. "What a mistake," he thought, "not to have brought Major to keep me company." But the cause of his loneliness lay deeper than he knew—it was a heart-loneliness which the caresses of the faithful dog could have done little to cheer. Already there had set in that separation from his father that he had so greatly dreaded; but it was a separation caused by his own act rather than by the interference of any other person. He had to-day taken up a line of conduct towards Vincent which he knew well his father would not approve; and he could not shake off the feeling of being

under his displeasure. It was in vain to tell himself that he had received no direct command regarding his adopted brother, and therefore was guilty of no disobedience. He had disobeyed in spirit, and this was the cause of a heart-separation.

He rode again into the stable-yard by the back gate, for he did not choose to go round by the house.

"Your papa was seeking you, Master Willie," said John, coming forward to take the pony. "He didn't know till I told him as how you was gone a-riding. He's gone out in the double drag with missus and the young gentleman. Master's driving the bays. Why, Master Willie, wherever have you been? You've ridden Paddy a deal too hard, that you have."

At another time Willie would have been greatly concerned about having over-ridden his beautiful pony, but now his mind was occupied with other matters. He was vexed and mortified by the thought that, while he had been taking that very unsatisfactory ride, another boy was sitting in his old place beside his father, watching the beautiful bays dash along under Mr. Withers's masterly driving, perhaps even allowed the privilege of holding the reins for a while and receiving instruction in the art of managing them. Willie esteemed this a great pleasure, and he was angry that he had missed it; not angry with himself for having missed through his ungenerous haste to secure to himself the sole right to another pleasure, but bitterly, un-

reasonably angry with the boy who he believed was enjoying it.

An hour later, when Willie, standing on the steps, saw the bays pulled up at the door, he observed that it was Mrs. Withers, and not her son, who occupied the seat beside his father, while Vincent was sitting, looking dull enough, in the back part of the drag.

Mr. Withers helped his wife to alight, and turned to give some directions to the groom, before he noticed his son; then he said, "Why did you go off to-day without telling any one? I never knew you to do so before."

Willie reddened and looked abashed. "I only went as far as Barnston Common," he said hurriedly. "You always let me ride there alone."

Mr. Withers cast a keen, inquiring glance at the boy's flushed face. He was surprised to see him thrown into such confusion by so simple a remonstrance.

"I never asked you where you went," he said. "I never supposed you were anywhere you hadn't leave to go. I asked why you went without telling any of us. You lost a nice drive;" and considering this a sufficient rebuke for an offence apparently so trivial, Mr. Withers passed into the house.

Sharp little Vincent had been an observant and somewhat amused witness of this interview; and when he and Willie had gone into the schoolroom to prepare their lessons, he said,—

"Don't tell me you're not awfully afraid of papa. You reddened up like anything when he asked you why you went off without telling him. You looked for all the world as if you expected to get your ears boxed."

Willie made no answer, but continued laying his books in order on the table, an angry colour mounting again in his cheeks.

"Ha, ha, Master Will," continued the mischievous urchin, "I suspect you were somewhere else besides at the common, my good boy. Your doings will be found out some of these days, my angel. I wonder what you'll get then."

Bursting with indignation, Willie strode across the room and seized his small tormentor by the collar. Vincent made no attempt to free himself from the angry grip. Looking up with a mild and innocent expression, in which there was not the smallest sign of fear, he asked quietly, "Can *you* hog up your back and emit sparks?"

The child's cool impudence saved him. The question took Willie by surprise. He recognized the quotation, but failed to see what it had to do with existing circumstances; and by the time the application of it dawned upon him his anger had begun to subside. With a little admonitory shake he released his victim, saying,—

"We've got just an hour to learn our lessons, so you'd best hold your tongue and set about them."

"An hour! Oh, cricky! Who wants an hour for lessons? Here goes."

And for about three-quarters of the appointed time of study Vincent was quiet enough; and to do him justice he worked diligently. After that he became restless, and began moving about the room, examining and commenting upon any articles of interest it contained. Willie found his attention sadly distracted.

"I wish you'd be quiet," he said crossly. "You can't have your lessons done yet; and I may as well tell you Mr. Gray won't put up with any nonsense. If your work is not properly done, he will make you do it over again."

"Will he really!" said Vincent in a mock melancholy tone. "How painful for a boy with nice feelings!" and drawing out his elegant pocket handkerchief, he made a show of applying it to his eyes.

It would have gone ill with Willie's work that afternoon had not Mrs. Withers entered the room at that moment.

"Vincent, have you finished your lessons?"

"Yes, mammy; and now I'm helping Willie."

"I see how you are helping him. Run off to my room and practise that new song I was teaching you. Never mind putting up your books till afterwards," she added, seeing he was inclined to linger; "Willie cannot work while you stay."

"Very well, mammy; I'm off." And away he went, humming, "Chantez, chantez toujours."

A lively sense of gratitude towards his stepmother as she closed the door behind her volatile

boy caused Willie to look up at her with the prettiest expression she had yet seen in his face. "Thank you," he said quietly, and settled to his books again.

"Can I give you any help?" she asked. "I understand boys' lessons pretty well."

"No, thank you. When there is anything I can't understand, Mr. Gray explains; but I never have any one to help me to prepare for him. I only want to be quite quiet for an hour, sometimes a little longer."

"I will take care that you are not disturbed. Vincent is a sad chatterbox, amazingly quick at his own work; but he shall not interfere with yours." And from that day Vincent had express orders to leave the schoolroom as soon as his own work was done.

From that day, too, Willie trusted and respected his stepmother, for he saw that she would not willingly be unjust to him, even where her own son was concerned; and though it was long before he ceased to be shy and reserved with her, yet for many little kindnesses which she showed him, over and above justice, he was quietly grateful.

It was not at all hard to win the boy's goodwill; and yet towards Vincent every day served but to increase the aversion with which he had first met him.

## CHAPTER V.

### HOW MRS. DICKSON'S WORDS CAME TRUE.

MANY weeks passed away, and yet these two boys, who shared the same lessons, sat at the same table, and slept in the same room, came no nearer to each other than they had done on the day of their first meeting.

Could Mrs. Dickson have known exactly how matters were going with Willie during those weeks, she would no doubt have found some satisfaction in being able to say that she had foreseen how it would be; but I am quite sure that she would not have considered how much her forebodings had to do with bringing about a state of affairs which she would also have sincerely lamented, for it was owing to those ill-timed hints of hers that Willie had entered upon the ungenerous and unloving ways which were day by day hardening his heart and spoiling his whole character. "Love seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked." But Willie in those days sought his own continually, and was provoked to bitter indignation when privileges which he believed

to be his by right were claimed or enjoyed by another.

Any one who had not known Willie before this time might have been excused for thinking him selfish and ill-tempered. His stepmother, indeed, made great allowances for him; and his father, though disappointed at the want of cordiality between the two boys, yet hoped that in a short time the matter would mend: for until a trifling circumstance opened his eyes to the fact, he refused to believe that Willie had any actual grudge towards his adopted brother.

One afternoon, two or three weeks after Vincent's arrival, it happened that Mr. Withers had occasion to visit a certain farm on his estate; and as Mrs. Withers was remaining at home to receive visitors, he went on horseback, and took Willie with him. While talking with the farmer, he found that the latter was offering for sale a nice, well-trained pony, of which he thought he would like to make a present to his stepson, so that Vincent and Willie might enjoy rides together; but he resolved to say nothing about it to either of the boys until he had an opportunity of judging how far Vincent might be trusted to take care of himself on horseback.

On their return they met the little fellow in the grounds, and Mr. Withers told his son to dismount and allow Vincent to take his place. Now, from the time that Willie's mind had become impressed with the idea that in order to maintain anything of his old position in his home he would have to struggle

for his rights, the exclusive proprietorship of his beloved pony seemed to him a kind of test by which he could tell how far he was successful. As long as no hand but his own directed the movements of his pretty pet, he felt that he had at least one privilege with which the adoption of another son into the family had not interfered. It was therefore with extreme dissatisfaction that he received this order; and he hesitated so long to obey it that his father, thinking he had not heard, repeated it. Then Willie, turning to him a face from which all pleasant expression had vanished, pleaded that the pony was his own, and that he could not be required to yield it to another. So near an approach to disobedience was more than Mr. Withers had ever tolerated. He did not stop to argue the point, or to explain why he wanted to see Vincent on horseback; but laying his hand upon the bridle, he sternly bade his son dismount at once.

With a bitter thought that now it was all over with his sole proprietorship, the boy flung himself out of the saddle, and walked hastily off in another direction, without waiting to see Vincent mount. He knew that the mortification of seeing his rival take the place which he had striven with all his childish might to keep for himself alone would be more than he could go through without tears. Even as it was tears of anger did rise to his eyes, but the heat of his indignation dried them away. For the first time since he could remember he felt indignant with his father. In his thoughts he accused him of

injustice and wrong, and his whole soul rose in rebellion. A bitter experience indeed to the poor little heart that had always been so loving and loyal.

But Mr. Withers's own mortification was no less deep than that of his son. For the first time in his life he felt heartily ashamed of his boy. He hated selfishness and meanness, and he was bitterly disappointed when the conviction was forced upon him that these faults were in Willie. He blamed himself severely for having been blind to them so long, —for having so long allowed his boy to remain the sole object of indulgences which childhood should be taught to share if manhood is to be saved from a selfishness which makes us worse than useless. Only with companions of his own kind could he have learned this lesson; and now Mr. Withers regretted that he had kept the child all these years in his own lonely home. He determined that from henceforth he should be made to yield to his adopted brother a full half of the indulgences and privileges which he had so long enjoyed alone. He would rejoice if he could see them shared willingly, but willing or unwilling shared they should be. Thus he would teach his son to bear and forbear; thus he would prepare him to take his place in life as one of a brotherhood of men, not as a selfish, solitary unit, a mere cumberer of the ground.

But, alas! the measures which Mr. Withers took to correct his former errors were but a fresh grievance to poor little much-aggrieved Will, who knew not the deep concern for his good by which they

were prompted. All intention of buying a pony for Vincent was given up for the present, and Mr. Withers insisted on taking his stepson for an occasional ride on Paddy. This in itself was a severe mortification to Willie, for he was a boy of strong will, and he had, as you know, set all his will against this. But worse still, the bitter disappointment which the father felt in the boy of whom he had been so proud gave to his manner of requiring these sacrifices a sternness and a coldness which to the child seemed only a token of that estrangement that Mrs. Dickson had somehow led him to expect, and this broke his heart. He became sullen and moody,—shut up within himself,—and oh, no one knew how solitary and sad!

Once or twice he was provoked by Vincent's stinging raillery into an angry assault, of which, however, he was ashamed almost as soon as he perceived how helpless the little fellow was in his hands. His helplessness saved him from suffering severely, and, to do the child justice, he made no complaint of the matter, and indeed seemed to forget it immediately. But once Mr. Withers came upon the boys just as Willie was aiming a quick, angry blow at the fragile figure of his companion. With a severe reprimand to his son for attacking one so much weaker than himself, he peremptorily forbade him ever, under any circumstances, to repeat this offence; and Willie, even in his estrangement and misery, would not disobey a direct command. So Vincent gained another advantage, and

enjoyed a triumph of which he did not fail often to remind his adversary.

But as the summer advanced Willie was to a great extent relieved of the society of the companion once so ardently longed for and now as heartily disliked. Mrs. Withers's youngest sister, a bright girl who had only just completed her school days, came to pay a long visit to the house of her brother-in-law; and Aunt Maggie was a prime favourite with Vincent, who for a week before her arrival could talk of nothing but what he would do when she came.

She had an intense delight in boys, who naturally were attracted to her in return; and she had looked forward with pleasure to a merry friendship with the junior members of her sister's household. But all her advances were lost upon shy, silent Willie, who shunned her as something belonging to Vincent Fitzmaurice. His great desire was that Vincent should let his friends and possessions alone, therefore he was determined he would not interfere with Vincent's. So from this unnaturally reserved boy Maggie Martyn could get no response, and she was obliged for a while to give up all her efforts to make friends with him. But Vincent was devoted to her, and thus Willie was again left very much to himself,—far lonelier now than in the old times. True, his possession of Paddy was now almost undisturbed; for Vincent, by no means a good horseman, and having no great natural love for the exercise, soon grew tired of claiming his share of the rides. But

the charm of sole proprietorship was broken, and Willie sometimes felt as if a reserve had grown up even between him and his pony.

One thing he still looked forward to eagerly, almost counting the days until it should take place. This was Cousin Geoffrey's visit during the approaching long vacation. His spirits rose as he remembered that it would be a much more prolonged stay than his school vacations had allowed him to make. Geoffrey, he told himself, would be all his own friend still; that was only fair. His father now had Mrs. Withers to be his companion, Vincent had his Aunt Maggie, and he should have Geoffrey. What swims they should have together on glorious summer days when Geoffrey would take him down to the sea in the dog-cart! And sometimes, no doubt, they would go for a sail. And in his own holidays might he not induce his cousin to take him with him on one of his fishing expeditions? What delight to set out on a delicious dewy morning while all the household was still asleep; to leave the house with its closed shutters far behind, and to wander up the course of the trout stream, miles further than Willie had ever gone before; to spend the live-long summer day among green meadows and in lonely woods, listening all the time to the ripple of the stream over its gravelly bed, stopping for lunch at some wayside inn, and then continuing their wandering on foot as far as Riverton, where they could take the train home in the evening, their baskets well filled, of course, with fair, plump

speckled trout—for the sport goes always well in one's day-dreams — themselves very sleepy, but covered with glory and honour by reason of their great success. Rise higher in the heavens, O sun! Bring hotter, longer days; and oh, bring Geoffrey!

At length the midsummer day appeared in the afternoon of which Geoffrey was to arrive. Willie had got permission to ride over to the station to meet him, while a groom would take the dog-cart to bring back the young student and his belongings. In gayer spirits than he had shown for a long time, the boy ran round to the stables to make known this arrangement. He stayed for a few moments to beg a carrot for Paddy, and having given it to him, and stroked his darling's neck, he was returning to the house to await Mr. Gray's arrival, when Vincent, with a letter in his hand, came running to meet him.

Now Vincent had long ago discovered his companion's warm attachment to the wonderful cousin whose arrival was to-day expected. And though in his heart he thought it would be very nice to be taken notice of by a grown-up student, and to be able to speak of him as a particular friend, yet Willie's proud satisfaction in the young man's prowess and accomplishments did not fail to provoke his raillery; and as this raillery evidently hurt and offended Willie, it soon became far too good a joke for Vincent to forego, and he began to turn Geoffrey Withers into ridicule in every way which occurred to his fertile brain.

He had a knack of making rapid sketches, which, though far from correct drawing, had at least the merit that you could generally tell what the crude outlines were meant to represent. He practised the art chiefly with a view to caricature; and now sketches of hunch-backed Geoffreys, squinting Geoffreys, Geoffreys with exaggerated noses, Geoffrey astride upon a goose's back, Geoffrey pursued by a mad bull,—Geoffrey, in fact, in every conceivable position that was supposed to be humiliating and ridiculous, and always with a legend setting forth the purport of the picture, met Willie at every turn. They were outlined upon his slate, placed between the leaves of his Latin Grammar, in the crown of his hat,—everywhere, in short, where he would be sure to find them when the small artist was by to witness his mortification.

Lately indeed Vincent, influenced by some special pique towards Willie, had carried this silly banter to a degree that was ungentlemanlike and ungenerous in the extreme. It had somehow come to his knowledge that Geoffrey Withers was to some extent dependent on his uncle for the means of carrying on his education. The fact was that Mr. Withers's younger brother had left his infant son but slenderly provided for, and Mr. Withers wishing to keep this small fortune undiminished for the lad's future use, had paid all his nephew's school and college expenses. How Vincent had got hold of this fact I cannot tell, for I think it was hardly known to Willie, or, if he knew it, he regarded it as

such a perfectly natural arrangement as to call for no comment. But to Master Fitzmaurice it seemed a matter highly derogatory to the Cambridge student. I am sorry to say it brought him very near to feeling that contempt for Willie's cousin that at first he had assumed in jest, and he did not scruple to twit the sensitive boy with the dependent condition of his vaunted friend, thereby causing him real and deep annoyance.

But all such annoyance was forgotten when on this bright morning Willie ran round to make the arrangements for meeting his cousin at the station. When he saw Vincent approaching with a letter evidently intended for him, a fear crossed his mind that it might contain a putting off of the expected arrival, for unless his father was away from home no one ever wrote to him except Geoffrey.

Geoffrey's writing indeed was on the envelope, but it bore the marks of having been already torn open and very recently gummed together again. It was, in fact, the cover of an old letter which Vincent had saved with a view to carrying out a very ungentlemanlike if not a spiteful joke.

On reopening the envelope there came to view, not a letter at all, but one of Vincent's sketches, more elaborately executed than usual, representing a lean and ill-conditioned youth with tattered clothes, which were much too small for him, carrying over his shoulder a stick with a bundle tied to the end of it, and with the other hand extending a college cap as a blind beggar might extend his hat

for alms. On the top of the page was written in Vincent's round hand,—

*"G. WITHERS, Esq., Charity Boy,"—*

and underneath the rude sketch was written—

*"THE STUDENT'S PETITION.*
*Pity the sorrows of a poor young man," etc.*

It was some moments before Willie fully took in the drift of this childish and very contemptible satire. When he had taken it in he turned sharply round, and forgetful of his father's prohibition, forgetful of everything except his own bitter, burning anger, he delivered a stinging blow upon the cheek of the astonished artist. A second blow would have followed, but his uplifted hand was arrested by his father's voice uttering the one word "Willie!" and there, right above them, was Mr. Withers, grave and stern, standing in the window of the library.

Then he realized what he had done: he had for the first time in his life disobeyed a direct and emphatic command recently given him by his father. Shocked and confounded he released Vincent from the angry grasp of his left hand, while his right, which had been raised to strike, fell harmless by his side, and he stood motionless, waiting for his father to speak again, but not daring to meet his eyes.

A moment's pause and then Mr. Withers said,—

"Mr. Gray is waiting for you; go in to your lessons.—Willie, I will speak to you after luncheon in this room."

With these words he turned away heavy-hearted to consider how he could best deal with this strange perversity in his son; for knowing nothing of the provocations which the boy had received, it seemed to him that Willie's too evident aversion to Vincent, and occasional violence towards him, arose only from a most ungenerous jealousy, and from an overbearing temper which would not allow him to mix happily with his equals. How to correct these faults was the problem which Mr. Withers now felt himself called upon to solve.

As to Willie, he never knew how that morning's work was got through. Vincent's derisive grimaces as they both hurried to the schoolroom showed that in the satisfaction he felt at his adversary's humiliation he had forgotten the pain of his angry blow. During the lesson time he found one or two occasions to remind Willie that he was wanted in the library after luncheon, and when Mr. Gray was not looking he made sundry gesticulations horribly suggestive of what he supposed might take place at that interview; and for aught Willie knew there might be good reason for such a surmise. Measured by his standard, that direct act of disobedience was an offence of deeper dye than any he had hitherto been guilty of. He knew not what might be its consequence, but he acknowledged to himself that it might fitly be visited even with the humiliating and

hitherto unexperienced penalty of which he had such an especial dread.

At last the lesson hour was over. But Willie, making an excuse of the additional work which his inattention had brought upon him, remained still in the schoolroom; for he could not endure to appear at luncheon, he could not meet his father's eyes first in the presence of others. Yet he did not occupy himself with his impositions; he sat with his arms folded upon the table, and his sunny head bowed upon them in dull, tearless sorrow. He sat there until he heard the stir caused by the family rising from the luncheon-table. Then his father's step crossed the hall and entered the room opposite. Willie was not one who would seek to defer the inevitable; he too rose and followed his father into the library.

## CHAPTER VI.

### BANISHED FROM HOME.

THERE was a painful tightening about Willie's throat, and his heart throbbed wildly as he turned the door handle and entered the library. His father was sitting at the writing-table engaged on some letters. The afternoon sunshine coming through the western window fell upon his nobly-shaped head, touching his hair and beard with a warmer colouring. He seemed intent upon his writing, and for some moments he did not look up or take any notice of his son. Those moments sufficed for a flood of recollections to rush in upon the boy's soul,—recollections of summer afternoons when he had come in gaily at an appointed hour to claim some promised ride or walk with his father, and found him sitting just as he was now, with the same lights upon his figure; of the welcoming smile which on those days met him as he entered; of the hand extended to draw him to his father's side; of the left arm passed round him as he stood waiting, while the right hand rapidly wrote the concluding sentences

of a letter. Oh for one of those smiles now! oh for one moment's pressure of that warm, circling arm, to thaw the icy coldness that was coming about his heart! Another moment, and that longing would have overcome the boy's reserve; another moment, and he would have come forward with tears and sobs to crave a return of those old tender ways,—and if he had done so, what would have become of the stern words that the father was preparing to speak? Another moment—

But before that moment passed Mr. Withers pushed away his papers, and turning right round in his chair, he fixed upon his son eyes full of that grave displeasure which to a true-hearted child is more terrible than chastisement, which, indeed, is what makes chastisement dreaded. That look sealed up the fountain of Willie's tears and entreaties. The boy dared not speak now,—he could not cry.

"He does not feel," thought Mr. Withers, deeply pained, as he saw the cold, unmoved face of his child. "Has my son indeed ceased to care whether I am pleased with him?"

"I am nothing to him now," thought Willie; "there is no love in his eyes for me any more." And then there came to the child a strange yearning for the mother whom he had never seen.

Thought is quick. All this passed in the short pause before Mr. Withers spoke; then he said,—

"Willie, there is no use in telling you how deeply grieved I am at the change that has come over you of late. I will not speak to you of that,

because you do not care. Your conduct towards Vincent has revealed to me an amount of selfishness, and I may say *meanness*, in you that I little thought to have found in my son. I fear I can do but little to remedy this. I cannot change your nature, but direct disobedience to myself I cannot and will not allow. You have been a spoiled boy, and I was blind to it until lately. Now that my eyes have been opened, I have changed my plans for you. You are aware that I intended you should be educated at home until you should be advanced enough to enter Ascham Hall school; but since I have seen how completely home-training has failed, I dare not delay any longer to seek for you some more efficient discipline. I am therefore making arrangements to send you at the end of the summer vacation to a preparatory school. I still hope that you may learn there what you ought to have learned by this time, —the principles of subjection to authority, and of some kind of *tolerable* behaviour towards your equals. That is all I have to say to you, except that if you again disobey me during the few weeks you have to remain at home, you shall be sent away at once, without waiting for the end of the vacation."

So saying, Mr. Withers turned abruptly away, and to all appearance began arranging the papers on his writing-table. In reality he was hopelessly disarranging them; but to Willie his actions seemed deliberate, cool, and firm as ever.

For some moments the boy stood as if rooted to

the spot, wondering if he had heard aright, or if it was all a troubled dream. He had entered the room dreading above all things to receive bodily chastisement, as if that were the most terrible thing that could befall him. Now, he felt that he would give anything that his father had so punished him, rather than have spoken to him those bitter, cutting words. Surely never rod could hurt as they did. But the boy knew not how sharply they smote upon the very heart of him who spoke them.

In the dead silence that followed a cry trembled upon the lips of the child—a cry which, had it been uttered, would have shaken at once the stern composure of the father: "O father, do not send me away; it breaks my heart. Punish me any other way; do not send me away from you."

But the words never were spoken. Before his parched lips could frame them, Mr. Withers said coldly, and without looking at him,—

"I have no more to say to you; you can go."

And so he turned and left the room without having spoken a word or showed the smallest sign of feeling from the time he had entered it.

Then Mr. Withers raised his eyes from his disordered papers, and with an expression of deep pain turned them towards the door by which Willie had gone out, hoping against hope that the boy would yet return with some expression of penitence, some appeal for pardon, little dreaming that his own coldness of manner had checked a cry which was coming up from such deep places in the child's soul

that it could not quickly reach his lips. They were father and son these two, and neither of them was gifted with readiness of speech to express his deeper emotions.

After waiting a few moments in the vain hope of Willie's return, the father's head sank upon his folded arms, and with a groan that was almost audible he thought,—"Not a word, not a tear, not a sign of feeling. Must I part from him this way, —my son, my only son?"

In the meanwhile Willie passed quickly through the hall and out of the house, seeking where to weep. In a few minutes his pony would be brought round; but he felt as if he could not go to meet Geoffrey just yet. The tears must have their way, if only for a few seconds; but how indeed could he meet Geoffrey now at all, much as he longed for his cousin's sympathy and advice? How could he tell him of the bitter trouble that had just befallen him? Would even Geoffrey understand that it was not all his own fault that he was thus banished from his home, sentenced to leave it in disgrace? or would he too join in blaming him only? Of this he was sure, Geoffrey would be sorry for him. They had had many talks together about schools and school life, and Geoffrey's experience had given Willie a dread of going as a small boy to school. Geoffrey himself, at a very early age, had been sent to a preparatory school, and he had been far from happy there. Probably the school was not very wisely chosen. At all events he spoke in widely different

terms of his life at Ascham Hall, and he had often told Willie that it was a happy thing for him to be able to spend his childhood in his own home under the care of his own father.

This idea, instilled into him by one whom he considered a very high authority on such matters, helped to make the sentence he had just received very bitter. And yet that aspect of it was bearable compared with the disgrace and the heart-chilling loneliness of his position. That the sentence could under any circumstances be revoked never even occurred to him; but would his father's manner soften at all towards him during the next few weeks? Would he look at him again with the old tender expression in his eyes? Would he call him "my son"? Would he press him in his arms, if only for one moment at parting?

Tears came welling up at this thought. The boy's heart was softening,—he began even to have some vague notion of seeking reconciliation; but just then the sound of hoofs trotting quickly up the gravel walk warned him that he was not all alone, and soon Vincent appeared mounted on Paddy—Vincent, the cause of all his troubles, himself gay and careless as ever. Then all Willie's softer feelings gave place to hot anger. Through this boy's fault, he told himself, he had hopelessly offended the only one in the world he greatly cared to please. He was soon to become an outcast from his home, and this boy himself was untouched by trouble; nay, he would be the gainer by his loss. Vincent,

who had already robbed him of so much, would soon have the sole enjoyment of everything that had been his,—his pony, his dog, his place in the home, nay even in his father's thoughts. It stung him to fury to think of Vincent, the boy of many friends, carelessly filling his place by his father's side, hanging familiarly upon his arm, thinking nothing of privileges which he would have given all the world to regain.

Meanwhile Vincent, never counting on the force of the pent-up passion he was coming to meet, trotted up gaily, and drew bridle close beside the agitated, trembling boy, whose face, however, was averted from him. Lifting his cap gracefully he addressed to him gibing words of mock sympathy.

The words were not fully spoken before he regretted them, for the glimpse he caught of a livid, quivering face showed him that such words now were cruel.

He had not much time, however, to reflect upon the matter, for Willie in blind fury sprang upon him, and wrenching the whip from his hand touched the pony sharply on the flank.

Paddy threw up his hind legs, and the small, light figure of his rider was flung forward upon the turf, his head coming in contact with the stone pedestal of a flower-stand; and he lay there motionless, the blood trickling slowly over his white face.

"Master Willie, how could you be so thoughtless?" exclaimed the gardener, running up to the stunned boy. "You've killed him," he added, gently

lifting the bleeding head. "Run and send some one for the doctor, Master Willie."

"Carry him to the house," said Willie hoarsely, his own face almost as white as Vincent's; "I will fetch the surgeon."

And before there was time for another word he had sprung into the saddle and was galloping towards the nearest gate, never slackening his pace till he drew bridle before the door of the village surgeon.

There was a gig standing at the door, and the young surgeon was just getting into it as the steaming pony was pulled up.

"What is the matter?" he inquired anxiously, for he saw at a glance the hot haste in which the boy had come, and his agitated face.

"Vincent!" gasped Willie. "You must go at once; Marks says he's killed."

"An accident?"

"Yes; a fall—his head."

"Come with me, and let my boy take home your pony," said the surgeon, judging Willie in no fit state to ride back alone.

"I am not going home," said Willie.

There was a despairing tone in his voice as he spoke, and before the other could interfere he was off again, this time at a quick trot; so the young surgeon, giving head to his horse, set off with all speed upon his urgent call.

Willie rode on through the village without any very clear idea of where he was going. Anywhere

but home, he thought; anywhere to get away from those who now surely would never want to see him more.

But now he had left the village behind, and having come to a spot where three roads met, he must make up his mind which to take. In his misery he threw the reins upon Paddy's neck; the pony might carry him whither he would.

Of course Paddy chose the road that was most familiar to him—that which led to Sunnycove, whither he had often in happier days carried his little master for a gay canter on the sands, and had always been indulged with a walk through the sparkling water to wash the dust from his hoofs before returning.

Tired with his headlong gallop to the doctor's house, Paddy ambled quietly along this road, and for nearly a mile his pace was not interfered with. But as they drew near the by-road which led down to the lonely little bit of sheltered beach known as Sunnycove, Willie gathered up the reins, and with voice and hand urged the pony forward along the highroad. He knew that Paddy, if left to himself, would turn down to the beach, and he could not bear that now. Anywhere but there. A visit to that beach had always been associated with rewards and treats and the sunshine of favour, in the old days when his father loved him. Poor little foolish lad! who thought because rebuke and grave displeasure had taken the place of loving smiles and ready, glad indulgence, that therefore love was gone.

As well think that the sunshine and the blue sky are gone when clouds for a while have covered them. But all over the world there are men and women and children constantly making the mistake that was crushing all the hope out of poor little Willie's broken heart to-day.

Up to this time he had gone on without any distinct intention except that of putting a distance between himself and the scene of his late rash act. But now, as he gathered up the reins, all at once he decided what he would do. He would ride on to the village of Saltrock, where the boats were. There he would dismount and turn the pony loose, to make his own way home—Paddy was quite wise enough to do that—and then he would go down among the boats, and perhaps he would go off to sea in one of them; perhaps—well, something would turn up to determine his next step. He did not much care what it was, only he *must* get away—away from that still white face, away from his father's crushing displeasure, away from the wailing, heart-broken mother of the *murdered* boy.

How Willie shuddered as that word occurred to him; how he tried to forget it, but it would not be forgotten. He quickened his pony's pace, as if to escape from the thought of it; but the sound of the pony's hoofs seemed to be saying it over and over again.

Soon he came to the place where the road turned off to Saltrock. It was still and lonely as usual, not a person within sight. There was a grassy

spot by the roadside, overshadowed by lime-trees now in their sweet-scented bloom. Willie scarcely noticed it at the time, yet as long as he lives the perfume of lime-blossoms will always recall to him that miserable hour.

Dismounting on the grass he gathered the reins into a loose knot and laid them upon the pony's neck. Then, as he gently caressed him, it came into his mind that he must never see Paddy again. He had parted from every one else without a word of farewell; but this gentle, beautiful beast, who had given him so many happy hours, he might at least take leave of him. Paddy did not know that he was— No, he would not even *think* that word. Paddy did not know that he had killed Vincent; Paddy would still receive his caresses. And so he put his arms about the handsome creature's neck, and laid his head against it.

"O Paddy, Paddy," he whispered, "some one else will be your master soon. But don't forget me, Paddy; we've had such jolly days together. And I'm so sorry if I ever was unkind to you; and oh, *so* sorry for what I did to you then, though I didn't mean to hurt *you*. But I meant worse. You'll never understand that, you dear old stupid, and so you'll never hate me nor despise me, you and Major. I wonder if you could give my love to Major; *he'll* miss me. O Paddy, if you could only speak and tell them!"—Tell them what? Who wanted to receive messages from him?

He released the pony's neck, and then he felt in

his pocket for some lumps of sugar he had put there for his favourite only that morning, but it seemed weeks ago. He gave the sugar, and then with a parting kiss upon the pony's nose turned down towards the hamlet.

## CHAPTER VII.

### DARK HOURS.

THE hamlet called Saltrock consists of a little group of brown, poor-looking cottages. A few fishermen were lounging about, and some women were sitting at their doors making or mending nets. The latter looked with some curiosity at Willie as he passed; it was not a common thing to see a gentleman's child there, especially by himself.

He passed through them all and out upon the rough little pier to which the fishing-boats were moored. There were also a few schooners, chiefly colliers, and one of these was discharging its cargo.

Willie had come down upon the pier with a vague notion that he was to go away in one of these boats, that some of the masters of them would take him for a sailor; but when he got down among the men, who were busy with their own affairs and scarcely turned to look at him, all thought of that left him immediately. At home, ever since Vincent came there, he had considered himself large and strong for his age, and sometimes

he felt as if he were coarse and awkward. Now a change seemed to have come over him, and he felt himself small, slight, childish, and most embarrassingly gentlemanlike. His well-made, serviceable tweed suit, which had looked homely beside Vincent's finery, was here refined and elegant. At once he felt the folly of the plan he had been forming, and he thought no more of it. He strolled about aimlessly after that, down to the end of the pier and back again, noticing carelessly the falling of the tide.

A poor woman offered him shrimps for sale, which he declined, but he gave her sixpence that he found in his pocket.

"Bless your pretty face," she said as she received it; "it's gay to see a gentry child down here."

"'Ave a sail, young master?" said a man who had seen his gift to the shrimp-seller. "If you can find me 'arf-a-crown where that came from I'll take you round the 'arbour in my boat, as steady as—"

"Better not tempt 'im, Bill," said another man. "Most like the little kid 'asn't got no leave to be 'ere, and you may get into trouble for taking 'im. Better not meddle with gentlefolk's youngsters. I'll lay you a wager that little chap's playing truant, same as my Jim did last week. I gev it to 'im, I did. Poor little kid! *'e'll* not do it again, I promise you."

If Willie had any doubt left as to how he appeared in the eyes of these people, these words must have dispelled it. To them he was a child, and very evidently the child of a gentleman. He

began to dread their notice: perhaps they would find out what he had done. So he turned from the little pier and from the group of cottages, and wandered along the bare, brown strand, where he was sure of being alone.

Must he always in future fly thus from the presence of his fellow-men? Was not that what happened to Cain? But he was not like Cain, and yet—oh, that horrible thought! Turn where he would it followed him. Since he could not get away from it he must face it; he must sit down somewhere and think it out.

At the end of a long line of rocks, left bare by the falling tide, a little boat was moored. He made his way towards it over the brown slippery seaweed, and having reached it he got in and lay down to think out the answer to the question that haunted him.

After all *was* it murder? Vincent might be dead, he felt almost sure that he was, or at all events that he would die; but he had never meant to kill him. How could he have known that the pony would plunge so violently? Even Marks had not accused him of any intention in the matter; he had only said, "How could you be so thoughtless?" But was it thoughtlessness? He had meant to make the pony plunge. Even so. How could he tell that the plunge would unseat Vincent? Ah, he had *meant* to unseat him. Yes; but a fall on the smooth turf could not much hurt the boy. He (Willie) did not know that he would fall with his

head upon the stone; he had not seen or thought of the stone. True; but in the moment just before Vincent was thrown, would he have greatly cared if he should be killed?

Ah, *that* was the question. Willie had been taught to be honest about his own acts; he had been taught to make no excuses that were not strictly and entirely true. But this question he could not answer even to himself; he did not know whether he would have cared. He only knew that at one moment his heart had been full of bitter anger against the boy who he believed had robbed him of all he valued most, and in the next he would have given all his possessions over and over again to be able to recall the act that had laid him motionless and bleeding on the ground.

But even suppose his soul was guilty of Vincent's death, who could tell that it was not all an accident? No one but Marks had seen him touch the pony, and Marks had reproached him only with thoughtlessness.

Not for one moment did this consideration bring any comfort to Willie. He knew at once that it was utterly vain to try to comfort himself with it. It mattered little to him who knew whether he had wanted to kill Vincent. It mattered terribly what his intentions had really been. If he was guilty, *God knew it.*

Then he thought again of Cain, and shuddered. Oh, the awful loneliness of being for all his days an outcast and a wanderer, guilty of an unforgivable

sin: no one in the world would want to have anything more to do with him. No one in this world; but somewhere, in some bright place far away, was there not a pitying spirit who loved him still,—some one who, if she could but reach him, would surely forgive him and comfort him? For the second time that day the thought came to him of his mother, and with the thought, oh such a passionate yearning for the love and pity that some instinct told him she would not refuse. He thought about this until the ice melted from his heart, and there came to him at last the much-needed relief of tears. And after that the weary child, worn out with the tempest in his soul, fell into a heavy sleep.

For a time he slept profoundly, moving not a limb, and no dreams visited his weary brain. But as the effects of exhaustion began to pass off, he stirred and turned round, dimly conscious that he was cold.

Then with the same chill still upon him he found himself in the court-house at Marshton, standing in the dock, charged with the murder of Vincent Fitzmaurice. Raising his eyes to the bench, he saw there several magistrates whom he knew; and among them his father, looking at him sadly and fixedly, but speaking not a word. He tried to look away; but turn where he would, his father's eyes were fixed upon him still, always with the same sad, stern gaze.

Then came a lot of strange, confused proceedings, always preventing the trial from really beginning,

until Vincent himself came in laughing, and began to gibe at him. But with the inconsistency of a dream, this in no wise cleared him of the offence of which he stood charged.

Then Vincent climbed on Mr. Withers's knee, and tried to make him laugh. But his stepfather would not laugh; he only said, coldly and gravely, "He is not my son any more;" and then he drew Vincent to him, until the boy's brown curls touched the shoulder on which Willie's sunny head had lain so often, but now must lie no more.

An exceeding bitter cry broke from the heart of the desolate child, but his tongue refused to utter it. Then there was a stir in the court, which had suddenly become crowded; and with a short, indignant bark Major leaped into the dock, and began licking his face. Willie, in his troubled dream, threw his arms about his only friend; and that warm, living touch seemed the most real thing in all the strange, unhappy scene. Then the court vanished altogether, and Willie found himself lying on his back under a twilight sky, with no one near him except Major; for the dog was there really, gently licking his hands and face, and uttering the little low, short barks with which he expressed the deepest satisfaction.

Scarcely had Willie recollected where he was and how he had come into the boat, when he found himself lifted out of it in the strong arms of his cousin Geoffrey Withers.

How long he had been asleep! It was nearly

dark, and the tide had risen, so that Geoffrey had to walk through the water to reach the boat. He carried his little cousin over to the dry beach and set him down upon his feet on the shingle.

When he had stood for a moment in the fresh, cool air, all the events of the past miserable day came crowding upon his recollection, and he shrank away from his cousin as he asked piteously,—

"Geoffrey, did you know—did you know that it was *I* who killed Vincent?"

"You! Poor little fellow, is that the trouble? Vincent is not killed."

"Is he going to die?"

"He has only sprained his ankle. There was a very slight concussion of the brain, but all danger from that is over."

"And he is *not* going to die?"

"He is in no danger."

Willie drew a long breath, which ended in a sob; then he clasped his hands over his cousin's arm and hid his face upon it.

"What had you to do with Vincent's fall?" asked Geoffrey.

"I made Paddy plunge. I *meant* to do it. I wanted Vincent to be thrown. But oh, I never thought of the stone; but—but—just for one moment—I think that even if I *had* thought of it I shouldn't have cared. O Geoffrey, am I as bad after all as if I had killed him?"

Now, Mr. Geoffrey Withers was going some day to be a clergyman, so I suppose he ought to have

been able to answer questions of this kind; but he was not quite ready with an answer at this moment, so he only said,—

"If you had come back to see that he was *not* killed, instead of running away, you would have saved a great deal of trouble both to yourself and others. Your absence has caused great grief and anxiety at home. Come, we must get back as fast as we can."

So saying, he began to walk rapidly over the shingle, back to the road where the dog-cart was in waiting.

"I must have been a long time asleep," said Willie; "it is nearly dark. But it doesn't seem to be getting any darker, and the light is at the wrong side of the sky."

"I think *you* are at the wrong side of something. It will be broad daylight soon. This is morning, Willie."

They got into the dog-cart, and Geoffrey wrapped a rug closely round the boy, observing that he must be cold. He was cold, but he scarcely knew it. That pressing question must get settled—and very soon he returned to it—Was he as bad after all as if he had killed Vincent?

Geoffrey saw that he must not only answer him truly, but that he must try to give him some comfort. At a future time, no doubt, people would come to him with questions of this kind; people whom perhaps he should never know of would look to him and hang upon his words, to find in

them some message of peace for trembling, conscience-stricken hearts. To Geoffrey this thought was a very serious one, and he did not want to be forced to teach before his time; but that poor little white, unhappy face, upturned to him in the brightening twilight, pleaded so earnestly for sympathy and comfort that the sight of it overcame his reluctance. Nevertheless he must not answer hastily; and so he asked,—

"Are you very glad to find that you have *not* killed him?"

So very glad that he could not say so except in a half-stifled *yes*, that sounded like a sob.

Geoffrey understood, and he continued his questioning.

"Why did you wish the pony to throw him? Had you a quarrel?"

"Yes, I believe so—at least, I think it was all one long quarrel ever since he came; and latterly I got to hate him, and papa was angry because I didn't behave better to him. And this time papa had just told me I should be sent away to school for disobeying him about Vincent. But oh, he didn't know—I mean papa didn't know—how hard it was, and how Vincent was always provoking me. And then I came out, and I saw Vincent on Paddy, and I thought, 'That is the boy who is turning me out of my home and making papa angry with me.' And so he came up and began chaffing me—he always chaffs me when I am angry—and I got furious, and I didn't stop for a minute to think

what I was doing, and the next moment I thought I had killed him. He might have been killed, you know; and, O Geoffrey, should I have been any worse then?"

"I don't think your sin was in that one angry act so much as in all that went before it and led up to it. You say you hated Vincent. If you made no effort to overcome that feeling, you were keeping within you that which leads people to kill. The Old Testament command is, 'Thou shalt do no murder;' the New Testament commentary upon it is, 'He that hateth his brother is a murderer.' When you hated Vincent, and allowed yourself to go on hating him, you disobeyed God; and I cannot think that he is less grieved and displeased with our disobedience than Uncle Tom was with yours."

This was not comfort, certainly; but Willie was so deeply miserable already that he heard the words without sign of emotion, with only a hopeless, weary kind of assent.

"But, Will, our Father who is in heaven knows just how much you were tempted, and I think he was very merciful to you in preserving Vincent from being more seriously hurt."

"What is it, Will? You were going to say something."

"Perhaps God was taking care only of Vincent. I don't think God was caring for me, Geoffrey."

"Why not for you too?"

"Because, you know, I was disobeying him. I

hated Vincent. I was a murderer in my heart. God couldn't have been taking care of me."

That fatal mistake again—a mistake that is making half the world miserable, and hardening men's hearts in sin. Geoffrey knew that a great part of his future work in the world would be to combat this error, and now he was forced to begin. He could have wished that some other might do it this time, but there was none other at hand. The child was broken-hearted, and He whose servant Geoffrey had vowed to be came to bind up broken hearts; and so in the increasing light of a summer morning, under the open heavens, with only his little cousin for a hearer, Geoffrey Withers for the first time in his life preached the gospel.

But he knew not whether the child was in any degree comforted, for Willie heard his words impassively and answered nothing. Only when they approached the house he said nervously,—

"Geoffrey, do you think papa will be up yet? I don't want to see him, you know."

"I wish we could see him," replied Geoffrey; "but I don't think he can have returned yet."

"Returned! where is he gone?"

"To look for you."

"What did he want me for, Geoffrey?"

"To bring you home, of course. Your disappearance has caused a great deal of trouble in the house. Paddy was found and brought home by a man who recognized him as your pony. From the way in which the bridle was arranged, we knew

you had not been thrown. Uncle Tom thought you might have ridden on to Marshton and taken the train from that; and I know that he intended, in case he could hear no tidings of you there, to go on to the nearest station on the branch line, for the pony was found between that and Marshton. I don't think he can have got back yet; but I wish we could let him know you are safe."

"Why couldn't he let me go? I have been nothing but a trouble to him lately. He was all the time more or less angry with me, and now he was going to send me away, you know. Why did he take all that trouble to find me when I was gone?"

"Because you are his son, I suppose. I know no other reason."

Willie asked no more questions, and by the time they had arrived at home he had nearly fallen asleep again.

The stillness of night was yet over all the house; only one servant had sat up to admit them. Geoffrey almost carried his weary little cousin up the darkened, silent staircase to the room which had been prepared for himself, and laid him in the bed there; and then he set off again in the dog-cart, hoping to meet his uncle, while Willie once more forgot his questionings in a long, dreamless sleep.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### ANXIOUS SEARCHING.

AND what had been happening in Mr. Withers's house during the hours in which his only son had been so unaccountably absent from it?

About two minutes after Willie had ridden away in such hot haste, Vincent opened his eyes and looked about him. At first he was somewhat bewildered. He had been carried into the house, and Maggie Martyn with a soft sponge was removing the blood from his hair and temples.

Soon he remembered what had happened, and then he complained that his ankle was painful. Aunt Maggie opened and drew off his boot, and called for water to bathe the sprained ankle; and before it was brought his mother came in, smiling and concealing her alarm, as mothers often do.

While the ankle was being bathed, Vincent told them how the pony had thrown him; but he did not mention Willie's name in connection with the accident. Indeed, he was not encouraged to talk much; and when the surgeon came and had examined

him, he desired that the patient should be kept for some hours very quiet in a darkened room.

So he was brought to the pleasant bedroom where he and Willie slept, and either his mother or Aunt Maggie sat beside him until dinner-time, when Florinne came to fill that place.

Now Florinne was nearly as great a chatterbox as was Vincent himself, and she found some difficulty in maintaining the silence which had been enjoined upon her. To sit silent in a darkened room, with her nimble fingers unemployed, would have been indeed a severe trial to the lively Frenchwoman, so she soon took out her tatting and got inside the drawn window-curtains to have light for her work, as well as to see what might be passing in the world outside.

What was passing at this moment was Willie's pony, led by a strange man. Florinne leaned out of the open window and inquired whether the young gentleman himself had returned; for she knew that Willie had not been in the house since he had ridden off to fetch the surgeon.

The man replied that he had found the pony quietly grazing in a field, with the reins tied in a knot upon his neck, but could find no trace of the young rider. Florinne's exclamation caused Vincent to start up in his bed and ask what was the matter.

In vain the maid tried to persuade him that it was only "un méchant chat" who had just caught "un pauvre petit oiseau" in the grounds outside.

He had caught the expression of serious alarm in the tone of her voice, and he knew her powers of invention too well to be satisfied with this explanation. Muttering something about the uselessness of asking questions of one who was "toujours menteuse"—a reproach which sat very lightly on Florinne—he threw himself back upon his pillows and set his own wits to work to make out the meaning of the few words which had reached his ear. Florinne, thankful to be questioned no further, continued her tatting in silence.

After some time Vincent asked, "What hour is it, Florinne?"

"Half-past eight. It becomes night. Shall I not then bring your milk and arrange you that you shall sleep?" said Florinne, who was longing for an excuse to leave the room that she might learn what had happened.

"Dinner must be over," said Vincent, not heeding her last words. "Florinne, will you ask Aunt Maggie to come to me? And you need not come back again; I want to talk to Aunt Maggie."

"Ah, what a child! He must have 'la tante.' He sends away the faithful Florinne because she will not disobey the orders of madam to talk to 'le petit babillard,'" said the Frenchwoman virtuously as she left the room.

Aunt Maggie soon came—a fair-complexioned English girl, matter-of-fact and truthful in every word and look; as true a type of her own people as the lively, good-natured, but somewhat inventive

Florinne was of hers. Vincent knew that though she might decline to answer his questions, she would not evade them untruthfully. She had brought him some strawberries and a glass of milk for his supper.

"Aunt Maggie, will you put them on the table, please? I'm not ready yet. I'm going to talk to you. I've been long enough quiet; and it's all nonsense keeping me in the dark any longer: so I know you'll draw back that curtain for me, because you're the dearest old girl in the world, and you always do what I ask you. My head is all right really, and a little daylight won't hurt my sprained ankle; besides, it won't last much longer, you know. I allude to the daylight, not to my ankle."

Maggie thought that as Vincent appeared to be so very much himself, there probably was no longer anything to be feared from the accident to his head, and she indulged him by drawing back the curtains from the window which looked over the park.

"Now, Aunt Maggie, come here to this side opposite the window, and let me look at you; you always look so awfully pretty in that blue gown. And let me see if you're wearing the roses I gave you this morning. That's a good girl. Did that Withers fellow arrive?"

"Yes; he dined with us."

"What is he like?"

"Very like a Cambridge student. I have not seen much of him yet, you know."

"Why hasn't Willie come in here all day? Is he too much engaged with his cousin?"

Maggie had no answer ready, and the troubled expression of her face did not escape Vincent. It was not for nothing he had placed her opposite the window.

Then remembering that when Willie should fail to appear at his usual bed-hour Vincent would be sure to ask questions, she said,—

"I don't think you can see Willie to-night. He is out at present; and as he is not likely to be back for some time, it is arranged that he is not to sleep in this room. You know you should be going to sleep presently. If you get a good sleep we will allow you to talk as much as you like to-morrow."

"Is Willie gone out driving with his cousin? I heard wheels and no end of commotion just now, and I couldn't make out where people were going at this hour."

"Young Mr. Withers has gone out driving, and his uncle has gone too."

"Aunt Maggie, you're not answering my questions; and as for Florinne, she told me nothing but lies. There's something wrong with Willie, and there's some mystery about all this driving and riding so late in the evening, and you may as well tell me all about it; for if you don't tell me I shall keep awake trying to imagine what it is. Where is Willie?"

"I don't know, my dear; but I don't think there

is any reason to be uneasy about him. Probably he will come back with his father."

"What was that about the pony? I heard something through the window. Was Willie thrown?"

Maggie saw there was nothing for it but to tell what she knew. Vincent's curiosity was working him into a state of excitement more injurious than anything she had to tell.

"I don't think Willie was thrown, dear; but he has not returned since he went to fetch the surgeon for you, and he has sent the pony home without him. His father is gone to find him. No doubt he will bring him home soon."

"And has Geoffrey Withers gone to find him too?"

"Yes."

"Now I know what all this driving meant. Willie's run away, and they're gone to look for him. Aunt Maggie, if anything bad happens to Willie, it's my fault."

He spoke with much suppressed emotion, almost with a sob, and after the words were uttered he hid his face in the pillow.

Maggie sat down beside him and took his hand in hers. If this was on his mind it was best to let him speak.

"Tell me how that was," she said gently.

"I made him miserable. I didn't think of it at the time, but I've been thinking of it now—ever since I've been lying here. You see, Willie is a queer fellow, and he worries about things that

would hardly vex me at all; and I used to think it fun to see him riled, and so I was always chaffing him. I hardly ever left off at it. And to-day I chaffed him when I shouldn't have done it, because papa was awfully angry with him, and that makes him more miserable than anything. I knew as soon as I saw his face that I shouldn't have teased him then."

Maggie knew something of Vincent's powers of "chaffing," and this confession at once revealed to her much of the cause of Willie's sullen and unsociable demeanour. She felt a great pity for the sensitive boy, who until lately could have had no experience which would teach him how to meet this kind of banter. Vincent continued,—

"It was all my fault, too, that papa was angry with him. Oh, I hope he didn't get caned! You see he's such a queer fellow. You know I shouldn't care much about a spanking once it was over; but the thought of it would be nearly death to Willie."

"My dear," said Maggie gravely, "you have been, I am afraid, very thoughtless to poor Willie. We will not talk any more about it now; but you must try and make up in the future for this past unkindness."

"I didn't mean to be unkind to him, Aunt Maggie; but he's such a queer fellow. I didn't know it was unkind, really, until to-day."

Maggie thought she knew at last what sort of a "queer fellow" Willie was—a shy, sensitive boy, with a dumb, deep love for the two or three per-

sons who were dear to him, but one who would always be slow to make new friends. She thought what a good thing it would be if he and Vincent could become friends; what an advantage to both boys if they could have real confidence and companionship in each other: differing as they did, they would be the very boys to do each other good. All this passed through Maggie's mind; but to Vincent's last remark she only answered,—

"It is a good thing that you know it now; but, Vincent, I really must not talk any more to you to-night. To-morrow, if you are quite well, you shall tell me all about this, and we will consider how to make amends to poor little Will. It is a serious thing to have come into his home to make him miserable, as you say you did."

Then when she had seen him drink his milk she bid him good-night; and as she left the room he said,—

"Aunt Maggie, be sure to tell papa that what Willie did to-day was all my fault."

Maggie Martyn knew nothing of what Vincent was alluding to, for Mr. Withers was not one to speak of his child's errors; and, indeed, he felt too keenly the disgrace he had been obliged to inflict upon him not to shrink from exposing it to others. He meant to tell no one except his wife why he had resolved on sending Willie to school; so when Geoffrey, missing the accustomed greeting of his young cousin, asked where he was and why he had not come to meet him, Mr. Withers evaded the

question, and replied that the boy would be pretty sure to turn up before the evening was over.

Nevertheless, when in answer to his inquiries just before going in to dinner he was told that Master Willie had not yet returned from his ride, he felt some uneasiness, not unmingled with displeasure, that his son's perversity should have taken this new turn.

During dinner he was very anxious; but he failed in no attention to his wife or to his guests, and no one could tell that his ear was all the time on the watch to catch the sound of Paddy's hoofs.

The ladies had already strolled out into the grounds, and Mr. Withers and Geoffrey were about to join them, when a servant came in to tell the former how the pony had been brought home without his young owner.

Turning very pale, Mr. Withers hastened out to question the man who had brought him; and Geoffrey followed, hardly less concerned.

With a face of such pain as the young man hoped never again to look upon, his uncle turned to him for advice as to what steps should be taken. After a few minutes, however, he was sufficiently calm and collected to decide upon a course for himself, Geoffrey having arranged to make inquiries in another direction.

Returning unsuccessful at a late hour in the evening, Geoffrey learned that his uncle, following up a slight and unsatisfactory clue, had started by train as before related.

As Geoffrey jumped down from the dog-cart in the half-darkness of the midsummer night, Major came running to meet him, his deep bay resounding through the stillness. A happy thought now occurred to Geoffrey. It had long been a practice in the house when any one wanted to recall Willie from any part of the grounds to send Major for him. Major might be lying in the sunshine, his head sunk upon his paws in a very luxury of repose; but at the words, "Fetch Willie," he would rise, shake himself, and applying his dear old faithful nose to the ground, he would unerringly track the child's steps until he found him.

"Where's Willie, Major? Poor Willie! Good old dog, fetch Willie."

The dog paused for a moment and looked steadily at the speaker. Never before at such an hour had this order been given. He had sought the child many times in sunshine and in rain, but it was always by daylight. Was Geoffrey making a fool of him? But on a repetition of the order, he laid his nose to the ground and ran hither and thither for a few seconds; then he returned, threw up his noble head, and bayed loudly, as if remonstrating that his faithful services should be mocked. Where should Willie be now but safe in bed? Geoffrey thought of a better plan.

"Poor Willie!" he said as he opened the back of the dog-cart. "Come, we must find Willie. Jump in, Major; you and I must find Willie."

Much bewildered, the dog, after some urging,

obeyed, and Geoffrey drove off--past the doctor's house, along the road by which several people had seen Willie ride out of the village, on until he came to the lonely cross-roads. Here he got down, let Major out of the dog-cart, and bid him "track Paddy."

Major knew that this must mean business, and to business he applied himself. Very soon he had found the pony's track, and without further hesitation he trotted along the straight road down which Willie had ridden in the afternoon, until he came to a spot that we know of—that grassy spot under the lime-trees whose blossoms were sweeter than ever now in the still June night. Here Major stopped and bayed, not loudly, but with a tone which expressed satisfaction.

He had come upon the child's track; but here it branched off from that of the pony, which he had been bidden to follow. What is a dog to do in such a case, especially if he have a dog's impression, that the object of the journey is to find the child?

Happily he was soon relieved from his perplexity by Geoffrey's voice again urging him to fetch Willie. He uttered a few low, short barks, and set off steadily through the sleeping hamlet, and down upon the pier, followed by Geoffrey now on foot—down to the end of the pier, and back again at the other side. An old man watching in one of the boats lifted his head at the sound of the footsteps. Geoffrey hailed him, and asked whether the child he was seeking had been seen there in the afternoon.

"Ay, there was a youngster straying about. We marked him, for we knew he were none o' our sort."

No further information could be elicited. Where the child had gone when he had left the pier no one had observed; the dog, after all, knew most about it.

Geoffrey followed him again, this time down upon the stony beach, where the scent was soon lost, for the tide had washed over the child's footsteps. Major ran hither and thither, perplexed, troubled—sometimes coming upon the track again where it lay above high-water mark, and then quickly losing it; until Geoffrey, seeing that the water had destroyed all continuous scent, gave up the hope of tracking the child in this way. But as the summer dawn was already in the sky, he determined to remain in the neighbourhood until the hamlet should wake up and he could make inquiries there. He would therefore go back to the dog-cart, which he had left standing in the silent street.

Returning, he walked along the beach, close to the edge of the receding tide,—Major, baffled and dejected, following at his heels. Suddenly the dog stopped, threw up his head, and sniffed the air; then with a short bark he plunged into the water, and the next moment Geoffrey saw him climb into the boat, and heard his cry of joy.

There, indeed, was the boy; but by what sense or instinct the dog had found him when the scent had failed, remains a mystery to this day.

When Willie had been safely housed, Geoffrey Withers set off again, this time bent upon communicating as quickly as possible to his uncle the news that was so all-important to him.

As soon as any official could be found sufficiently awake to attend to the business, the railway telegraph wires were set in motion, and the news was flashed hither and thither, with the result that Mr. Withers returned by an early train to the station nearest to his home. There he was met by Geoffrey, who knew he would be anxious to hear all particulars.

The younger man was not much the worse for the fatigues and anxieties of the past night; but with the other anxiety had been bitter agony, and he looked as he stepped out of the train full ten years older than he had looked yesterday.

As they drove home, Geoffrey cleared up for his uncle something of the mystery of Willie's disappearance, as well as of his previous unwonted conduct; and as the father learned how his child too had suffered, he forgot to be displeased with him any more.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE SOWING OF PEACE.

WHEN Willie again awoke it was somewhat past his usual hour for rising. After the first moment of wonder as to how he came to be in this room, all the events of that long summer day and night came to his recollection, and it seemed as if they must have occupied the space of many days, so far, so very far away in the past seemed yesterday morning, when he had awaked in his own room to the glad thought that it was the day appointed for Geoffrey's arrival.

When he had bathed and dressed he came once more face to face with the question, How was he to meet his father? If he had been overwhelmed by the sternness of his father's rebuke yesterday, how should he stand before it now, with these accumulated offences on his head? One thing he was almost sure of,—he should now be sent away at once. Had not the decree gone forth that that was to be the punishment of any further disobedience? And as Willie thought in cold blood

over yesterday's strange rash acts, he acknowledged to himself that he deserved no less.

While thus musing in deep dejection he was attracted by the sound of wheels upon the gravel, and looking out he saw his father and Geoffrey alighting from the dog-cart. But what was the matter with his father?—bowed, haggard, stepping heavily like an old man, and when he spoke his voice sounded hoarse and weak. Was he very ill? Boys are not very quick observers of such signs as these, but the change in Mr. Withers was too marked to escape the observation even of the most inexperienced. Willie hesitated no longer. In an instant he was downstairs and in the hall.

"Papa, what is the matter? Are you ill?"

At the sound of his child's voice, all the mute tenderness of his heart came for a moment into his face, and he held out his hands towards the boy.

"I shall not be ill now, my son, since I have seen you safe," he said in a strange, broken voice, and he twice kissed the fair young forehead.

Then, with his hand still upon the boy's shoulder, he opened the library door and went in. Sinking wearily into an easy-chair, he drew Willie once more to his side, but said nothing. At once the recollection of what had passed the last time he was in that room and of all that had happened since came back to Willie, and at the same instant he knew that it was anxiety about him, more than the fatigues he had gone through, that had thus bowed down that beloved head.

Clasping his hands about his father's neck, and hiding his face upon his father's shoulder, he wept tears of real penitence now.

Mr. Withers allowed the tears to have their way for a minute, then he said,—

"Ring the bell, Willie. You and I will have breakfast here together as soon as they can get it ready. I am not fit to appear in the breakfast-room, and I am not inclined to wait until I have dressed."

This was a merciful arrangement for Willie, to whom it would have been a real trial to appear at once in the midst of the household, where he had lately caused such a commotion. He felt very grateful for it, although he did not know that it was for his sake chiefly it had been made.

When breakfast was brought in, Willie poured out the tea and attended carefully to all his father's wants. Beyond mutual attentions of this kind, very little was said upon either side; and yet it was a happy time. Willie put away from him the thought that this must be almost his last day at home,—determined while he could to enjoy to the full the quiet gladness of reconciliation; for true heart-reconciliation this was felt to be, though pardon had neither been asked in words nor yet formally granted.

As soon as the meal was over, Mr. Withers reminded Willie that he must hasten to prepare his lessons before Mr. Gray's arrival, as he had done nothing yesterday afternoon. So Willie had

full occupation for the morning, and was not under the necessity of meeting any other members of the household until luncheon-time.

Geoffrey, on arriving at the house for the second time that June morning, had gone straight to his bath, and when he appeared in the breakfast-room he showed but little sign of having been driving about all night.

After having done his best to fulfil the duties of the absent master of the house, he related to the ladies some of his night's adventures, and explained to them how poor little Willie's agony of mind at the thought of having caused Vincent's death had resulted in his mysterious disappearance. He said nothing, however, about the angry feelings which had prompted that rash act. So no one but himself knew that it had not been an accident.

But when after breakfast Mrs. Withers had gone to sit with her husband, and Geoffrey had strolled off with Maggie Martyn to criticise the laying out of the new tennis-ground, the two latter fell to talking of their respective pets—Willie and Vincent. Geoffrey expressed surprise that such a nice, good-tempered little fellow as Willie could have appeared to his new relations in the character of a sullen and unsociable child. Maggie, however, could now quite understand it. Vincent's confessions had revealed to her much of the cause, and all that Geoffrey said of his little cousin went to complete that explanation.

She and her companion were agreed that it was

a thing much to be desired that these two boys, who were to spend their youth in the same home, should become good friends; but Maggie had her own plans for bringing about that state of affairs. She would take advantage of the penitence which each was now feeling for wrongs done to the other to urge them to such little acts of kindness and thoughtfulness one towards another as would be the surest foundation for kindly feeling in the future: for if it be true, as it is often said, that men more easily forgive those who have injured them than those whom they have injured, it is certainly equally true that the heart is disposed to a brotherly regard towards one's neighbour, through the doing of acts of kindness towards him and the taking thought for his comfort and happiness, still more than by the receiving of such benefits from him.

This theory Maggie, in a girlish fashion, laid before her companion; and though he quizzed the pretty theorist a little, and asked her if she would not come to Cambridge and lecture on moral philosophy, still in the end he acknowledged that he felt the force of her argument, and that he quite agreed with her, and would give her all the help he could in making a practical application of her philosophy.

Maggie, indeed, lost no time. Just before luncheon she sought Willie, and greeting him kindly, she said—

"So you were unhappy, poor little man, because you thought Vincent was killed, and you ran away

to mend matters! What sort of house do you suppose we should have had without *any* boy in it?"

"I didn't think of that," said Willie humbly.

"No; you were too much frightened about Vincent. You will be glad to hear that the doctor says he is going on very well indeed, only he cannot get about for some time because of his sprained ankle. He frets a little, you know, lying still all day with nothing to do. Won't you pay him a visit after luncheon to help him to pass some of the long day?"

"I will, if he cares to see me. But, Miss Martyn, has he got any nice books to read? Vincent is fond of reading."

"Yes; I hope he will be able to amuse himself with reading to-morrow, but for to-day, you see, the doctor forbids it, lest it should hurt his head. Are you fond of reading too?"

"Yes," said Willie, a little doubtfully. "I like it, you know, when I have nice books."

"I think it depends on that with most people; but I am sure you will be pleased with a book your cousin has brought you. Isn't it too bad? I have had the first enjoyment of it, and it's splendid."

"What is it about?" asked Willie with interest.

"Oh, it's about everything wonderful and delightful, and it is beautifully illustrated,—pictures of everything."

"I am sure I shall like it. Geoffrey always chooses nice books. But don't you think it might pass the time for Vincent to-morrow, when he is

allowed to read? I could wait a while for it, you know, because I can go out. And it's so dull for him lying in one room all day."

"That is very good of you, dear; but it would be a pity to wait so long for the enjoyment of your charming book,—though it would be such a treat to Vincent if you would bring it up to his room, and read little bits for him, and look over the pictures together. It's just the sort of book that at least two people should read together to enjoy it thoroughly."

Willie consented, for though naturally a little shy of this first interview, he was really pleased that a way was pointed out to him by which he could make some amends to Vincent. But fearing that he was still shrinking from the other boy's raillery, Maggie continued,—

"I think Vincent will be very glad to see you. Do you know, when he was lying quite quiet, with nothing else to think of, he began to think that he had acted very badly to you. And when he heard you were not to be found, he was very unhappy about it. He was afraid it was his fault. He is a terrible tease sometimes, but I do not think he will ever provoke you so much again, Willie. I know he is very sorry for having done it."

To know that Vincent was sorry for the provocations he had formerly given went a long way towards enabling a generous boy like Willie to forget them, and did much to remove his dread of the meeting. After luncheon he betook himself with his book to

their joint bedroom, where Vincent was to-day lying on a lounge near the window.

Maggie's first step was a great success. The book proved worthy of the praise she had given it, for it was one of that new generation of boys' wonder-books that has sprung up since "Jack the Giant-Killer" has been gathered to his fathers.

In these days there are marvels enough on our own marvellous earth to feed that love of the wonderful to which Jack in his day ministered a sufficiently harmless gratification; and scenes and adventures far enough removed from our everyday experiences to satisfy the liveliest imagination can now be found within the limits of explored nature. And if a hero's adventures are only quite unlike anything that has ever happened to ourselves or to any one we have ever known, they are none the less enjoyable for being within the limits of the possible; for then—who knows?—perhaps we might some day find ourselves in a similar position.

So Geoffrey had been guilty of selecting for his young cousin's amusement an improbable story! Improbable? I should hope so indeed. May I ask what are stories for if they must *always* be probable? Are not there enough of probable things happening every day to satisfy the most ardent lover of probabilities, without going to the trouble of inventing more? When you get up in the morning, are not you perfectly certain that a great many probable things will happen before night? And are you often mistaken? Can you remember any

day on which *some* probable things did not happen? My dear aunts and uncles, probable things are the bread and butter, the roast-mutton and rice-pudding of our lives,—very wholesome everyday fare; but when you want to give people a treat, let them have something improbable.

At all events, Willie and Vincent enjoyed their feast of richly illustrated improbabilities with a relish which caused all the unpleasant facts of their previous intercourse to be for the time forgotten. It was the first pleasure they had ever had together that was equally enjoyed by both, and in that sympathy of boyish enjoyment they drew nearer to each other than they had ever done before.

Later in the afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Withers, Maggie and Geoffrey, returning from a walk, met Willie just coming out of the house.

"Where to, Willie?" asked his father.

"To find the gardener," answered Willie. "I want to ask him if he can let me get some strawberries for Vincent; he is wishing for them, and I think there must be enough ripe now to let me gather some."

Maggie gave a triumphant little glance at her companion, and her satisfaction was complete when Willie turned back to say,—

"O Geof, that's the jolliest book you've ever given me; we've had such a good afternoon over it." And off he ran, all unconscious of the pleasure his words had given. It never occurred to him that there was anything remarkable in his

going to fetch strawberries for Vincent; if he had never done so before, why, Vincent had never before been laid up.

Mr. Withers now went up to see his stepson. He had not visited him before since his accident.

"O papa," exclaimed Vincent when he entered, "I did so want to see you; come here."

Vincent was one of the few children who can explain themselves thoroughly, for he was not hindered either by want of words, or by shyness, or by excessive sensitiveness to rebuke. And now he told his stepfather even more fully than he had before told his aunt of the repeated provocations he had given Willie, and how Willie's disobedience had been more than half his fault, and his disagreeableness had been *all* his fault; and now if any one was to be sent away in disgrace it should be he—Vincent—if there was any justice in this world. For the little fellow had as keen a sense of justice as any one, and he would not suffer that Willie should bear punishment for his fault, for that was a matter the inconvenience of which he could understand. If he had not hesitated to expose him to displeasure and rebuke on account of it, it was because rebuke, unaccompanied by any kind of chastisement, made about as much impression on himself as water on a goose's back; and he saw Willie wince under the slightest reprimand from his teacher, and *writhe* under a rebuke from his father, very much as people watch the contortions of an insect which they assert cannot possibly feel pain. Now, how-

ever, he explained matters fully, and even suggested that the transgression should be in some way visited on himself.

"As to that," replied Mr. Withers gravely, "I think we may allow the sprained ankle to serve for this time. The trouble which your thoughtlessness has caused to others has, I believe, really taught you a useful lesson, so I need say no more about it; but you must have more regard for other people's feelings in future, Vincent. Your amusement at our expense has been too much like that of the boys in the fable who threw stones at the frogs. You have caused very serious trouble between me and my boy, and might have caused a very painful separation."

Never before had Vincent been so near to feeling "suppressed" as he did under this rebuke, for the depth of his stepfather's feelings on this subject gave to his words an earnestness which made them very impressive. He was very quiet for a few minutes, and then he said, "I *will* try not to plague people any more, if I can remember it. I shall keep thinking that the sprained ankle is a punishment for being such a plague, and that will make me remember for a while. You see, I never could remember not to do things unless I got a punishment to impress it on me. Willie could though,—he's not a bit like me."

Mr. Withers felt rather thankful that he was not. But with all this little fellow's effrontery there was something winning about him which made people

forgive him easily. The rather stern manner with which his stepfather had received his confessions soon relaxed, and by the time Willie returned with the strawberries they were chatting pleasantly together on other subjects.

The rest of the afternoon passed pleasantly. Except while Willie was at his lessons, he was generally in Vincent's room; and they found a variety of amusements, which, when carried on in each other's company, were interesting enough. Though Willie did not think of it, he had now come very near to having that boy-companion who had haunted his day-dreams in the old times when he had been so much alone.

But notwithstanding the pleasure of this new companionship, and the happiness of being once more at peace with every one about him, Willie's spirits were saddened and subdued by the coming separation from his home; but he had some hope that his departure for this preparatory school might still be put off until the time appointed for it yesterday—before his aggravated offences had earned immediate banishment. Late in the evening he drew Geoffrey aside confidentially and said to him—

"Geoffrey, will you ask father to let me stay at home until the end of the summer vacation?"

"Have you asked him yourself?"

"No; I don't know what to say, because it's not altogether for myself. I couldn't ask to be let off on my own account, you know, after having behaved so; but Vincent would be so lonely if I had to go

away before he can get about. And I ought to do what I can, you know, to make up to Vincent, because it was I who lamed him. And yet it would look so mean to ask it on his account when I wish for it—oh so much!—on my own. You could explain it all, Geoffrey; won't you ask?"

"Uncle Tom," said Geoffrey, "will you be so good as to come here?"

He came over to them; and Geoffrey made the desired request, urging the plea of compensation due to Vincent, as well as Willie's own great desire. Mr. Withers heard to the end, then he looked for a moment, silently and tenderly, into the blushing face of his son.

"I am in no hurry to part with you, my boy," he said. "I have forgiven you."

After that Willie bid good-night. He was relieved now from the immediately impending trouble, and though he believed the original sentence to be still unrevoked, yet at ten years old eight weeks hence is such a distant period that one may well put out of one's thoughts a trouble that looms up from the end of that time.

## CHAPTER X.

### PEACE ESTABLISHED.

AFTER this, Maggie Martyn's work was easy. The task which she had set herself had been so well begun, that it was in a fair way of getting accomplished without further effort from her. To any one who has felt loneliness, true companionship with another of one's own kind, once it has been found, is too precious a thing to be lightly thrown away again; and during the days which followed, our young friends made rapid advances towards that boyish friendship which is the gladdest, the closest, and the most confiding of the companionships life has to give—save one.

Maggie, indeed, had turned their faces in this direction, and to accomplish this she had spoken only a few words. Ah, which of us remembers the *life* there is in words? My young friends, words which are not the expression of any thought of the heart, and therefore have no real significance, may be fruitless, and end with the utterance of them. Like dead seeds, which never spring up, they fall

to the ground, and there is no more about them. But words which come out of a real feeling have within them a germ of the same; and these take root in the mind of the hearer, and grow up and bear fruit after their kind. Words which come of bitter and unkind thoughts, as did those words of Mrs. Dickson, will bear such bitter fruits as the strife which had continued for so many weeks between these adopted brothers; but words which come from loving thoughts and genuine good-will, like Maggie Martyn's words, must, especially if uttered in due season, bear such good and wholesome fruits as the brotherly companionship which had at last begun to be established between them. My little friends, if careful gardeners pull up a weed before it goes to seed, lest its seed-shedding should cause them much tiresome weeding by-and-by, so will you and I, if we are wise, pull up all unkind thoughts before the words have fallen which should multiply such thoughts all round us.

I do not mean to say that Willie and Vincent never again fell out. Of course there were breezes, —I have never seen a boys' friendship wholly without them,—but during the first few days that they were thrown so much together, a genuine repentance for the past, and an honest desire to make up to each other for former unkindness, made them courteous and forbearing; and by the time these feelings had expended themselves, the habit of comradeship, the sense of needing each other, of not being able to do without each other, was too firmly

established to be much affected by a mere passing gale.

As soon as Vincent could get about at all, Willie himself suggested that he should have a ride on Paddy; and he accompanied him to the paddock, where they each had a good canter. And Willie took such pains to give instruction in the art of horsemanship that he soon had reason to be proud of his pupil's progress.

So the plans which Willie had been making for the summer vacation did not turn out exactly as he had been hoping. You see, "nothing is certain but the unexpected." Willie and Geoffrey were not, after all, such constant companions as the former had expected, neither were Vincent and his Aunt Maggie exclusively taken up with each other. In the long, bright summer days they made, it is true, many excursions to places of interest in the neighbourhood, but in these the whole family generally set out together; and when the party fell into pairs, Willie and Vincent for the most part got together, as was quite natural; and as Mr. and Mrs. Withers of course chose each other, it was a necessity of the case that Geoffrey should escort Maggie Martyn: and indeed, perhaps, that was quite natural too. At all events, every one seemed very well pleased.

I should mention that on Willie's eleventh birthday—an anniversary which occurred towards the end of August—Mrs. Dickson and her new pupils were among the guests invited to celebrate it. It

was a pleasure to Mrs. Dickson to meet her dear Willie again, and she was honestly glad to see him well and happy. She was fairly well off in her new home, and she had by this time forgotten the annoyance she had felt on finding herself obliged to leave the old one; she was therefore quite prepared to make friendly acquaintance with those who had been the cause of her leaving it,—indeed, she had forgotten that her feelings had ever been otherwise than friendly towards them. In the course of the day she remarked confidentially to Geoffrey,—

"It is a great pleasure to me to see Willie getting on so well with his new relations. How happily he has fallen into his place in the enlarged household. I see now that I was wise in preparing him for a considerable change in his manner of life. I warned him that he must no longer expect to occupy his father's whole attention; that with another young person in the house he must learn to yield a good deal, to bear and forbear; and the dear boy has profited by my instructions. He always was a teachable child. Ah, Mr. Withers, the training of the young is a nice art, and requires tact and prudence, I assure you,"—an assertion which Geoffrey saw no particular reason to dispute.

Willie had always had a party on his birthday, but never one so merrily entertained as this; indeed, no party of young people which included Vincent Fitzmaurice and his Aunt Maggie could ever become dull or listless.

Once the birthday was over, Willie allowed his

mind to dwell more on the thought which had indeed subdued his spirits during the whole of those summer holidays, enjoyable as they undoubtedly were. Now he told himself the time was drawing very near when he must fulfil that deferred penalty incurred some weeks ago. He had never wholly forgotten it, but he tried not to let the thought of it spoil the new-found pleasures that he must so soon leave; even now, true to his reserved nature, he did not speak of it.

One afternoon, when he counted that there could be but three or four days before his departure, returning from a ride, of which Vincent had had a share, the boys caught sight of Mr. Withers on foot. Willie dismounted and went to join his father; and Vincent, taking his place in the saddle, trotted briskly up to the house.

"That little fellow is beginning to ride very well," said Mr. Withers. "I saw a pony to-day which I should like to buy for him, and I have made an offer for it."

"It's hardly worth while now, papa—is it?—to get another pony for Vincent," said Willie, with something like a sigh in his voice.

"Why not?"

"Paddy will want exercise, you know, and Vincent is light. I would like Vincent to ride him when I am gone rather than any one else."

"Gone! where are you going?" asked Mr. Withers, looking puzzled.

"I—I thought I was going to school," stammered

Willie, a sudden hope kindling in his mind of something which seemed *too* good to be true.

Mr. Withers understood now. "Do you wish to go, Will?" he inquired.

"O father, *may* I stay?" There was a pathetic earnestness in the entreaty.

Mr. Withers sat down upon a rustic bench and drew the boy to his side.

"My dear little man," he said tenderly, "why do you not speak your mind to me more openly? I had no idea that this thought was troubling you all through these pleasant holidays. It must have greatly spoiled your enjoyment of them. When I told you I had forgiven you, I meant you to understand that that plan was at an end. *I* have thought no more of it since then, and I could not tell that you were thinking of it. My boy, fathers do not sit like judges to pronounce irrevocable sentence upon their own children. On that day when, sorely against my will, I told you you must go to a preparatory school instead of remaining at home until you were old enough for Ascham, I had come to the conclusion that it was necessary to send you away, in order that you might learn to bear yourself in a proper fashion among your own equals. Since that time, I find you are learning this at home quite as well as I could hope you would learn it elsewhere. Why, then, should I send you away from me earlier than need be? In two or three years more you will have come to the age when it is desirable for every boy to gain a wider ex-

perience of life than he can have in his own home. You shall then, I hope, go to school honourably; not because you are too overbearing to be managed at home, but as a necessary part of your education. Thank God, we are not obliged to make decrees like the laws of the Medes and Persians, which can never be revoked. Why did you not believe me, Will, when I said I had forgiven? It would have saved you a world of trouble, my child."

At that moment, with his father's eyes bent upon him, full of the old tenderness to which his heart had always responded, there flashed into Willie's mind words familiar to us all, words which he had repeated often without attaching to them any particular significance, but which from henceforth must always recall to him this hour,—"I believe in the forgiveness of sins." And as he thought of them, he remembered something which Geoffrey had said to him on that summer morning when he had seemed too weary and miserable to pay much attention to it. It was the first time since then that Geoffrey's words had recurred to his mind, but it was by no means the last time in his life that he so thought of them, and always with the thought was bound up the memory of this great joy.

There was a moment's silence. What words can we dumb Britons find to speak when our hearts are full? Then there was a murmured, "Thank you, father," followed by one of those rare embraces that passed on great occasions between these two.

And after that Willie walked home quietly by

his father's side, his heart overflowing with joy; for the cold shadow of that sorrow to which for weeks past he had believed himself to be steadily approaching was now removed for ever from his path. That evening, and during all the days that followed, Willie was, in his own fashion, as gay and joyous as Vincent was in his.

## CHAPTER XI.

### SEVEN YEARS LATER.

AND so Willie had a happy childhood in his own home until he was thirteen years old, and then he and Vincent went to Ascham Hall school together. At school they both formed other friendships, for Vincent was everywhere popular, and Willie was always sincerely liked by the few persons who knew him well. But during the whole course of their school life their most confidential friendship was with each other. Now more than ever they supplied each other's deficiencies; and wherever, either in work or in recreation, help was wanting to one of them, the other was sure to supply it.

Of course this close friendship did not escape notice among their school-fellows, and many were the attempts to give the pair a name which should commemorate it; but for a long time none of those which were suggested had that kind of suitability which causes a name to stick. "The twins" and "Castor and Pollux" soon dropped off, chiefly because as time went on the difference in stature be-

tween Willie and Vincent became more and more pronounced. Fair-haired Willie, growing rapidly taller, and noted for his strength of arm, promised to be a Briton of the brawny and broad-shouldered type; while sparkling little Vincent, brown-complexioned, slight and active, generally enjoyed the distinction of being the smallest boy of his age in the school.

A name which people make an effort to find generally does fall flat, as you will find if you try to give one to a young dog or a favourite pony. Ten to one the animal will never be known by the name you have laboriously invented for it; but some word uttered on the moment, and never intended for that purpose, will have such fitness as to cause it to become permanently attached.

So it happened in this case. One day a group of boys, among whom were our two young friends, were standing on the cricket-ground arranging sides for a game, when Vincent made some remark which sent the whole group except Willie into fits of laughter. To Willie cricket was a business too delightfully serious to allow even the preliminaries to be interrupted with any irrelevant matter. Resenting such interruption, he strode across the ground. With a face of imperturbable gravity he picked Vincent up, and having held him for one or two seconds suspended by the collar, with his feet several inches from the ground, he quietly laid him flat upon the grass, and returned to his place without a word.

"'Dignity and Impudence,'" exclaimed an onlooker; and this happy inspiration of genius from that moment became the sobriquet of these adopted brothers—a sobriquet which among their intimate friends was soon shortened to "Dig" and "Imp"; and by these somewhat ungraceful abbreviations they long continued to call each other.

Through all the events of their school life I cannot now follow them. I will only mention that throughout the whole of it—from the junior forms and upwards to the privileged sixth—both boys were always found among the upright and honourable and right-minded portion of the school. During the first year or two Vincent certainly did get into one or two scrapes, which, however, were not of a very serious nature; for the influence of Willie's innate respect for law and authority sufficed to restrain him from any more daring transgression of rules; and the good character which almost from the first the latter had won for himself enabled him to shield his more volatile companion from any very terrible consequences to these minor offences, —a service which Vincent repaid by coaching Will through the classical studies, which for a long time continued a difficulty to his matter-of-fact mind.

Their intellectual successes were on the whole pretty equal. Very soon Willie began to take prizes in various branches of mathematics; and as he moved up the school he got higher and higher marks in these subjects, until in his last year he was acknowledged to be the first of all. Towards the end

of his school life he also took kindly to natural science, which was a good deal encouraged by the headmaster. Vincent always did well in classics, and in modern languages he never failed to be ahead of all competitors. In the field, Willie, from the first a respectable cricketer, became at last the pride of the school; while Vincent's playground successes were chiefly scored in lawn-tennis.

And so at seventeen years we find our two young friends returning to the old home for a Christmas vacation. It is their last half but one. At the end of the next they are both to leave Ascham Hall school — Vincent for the civil service, Willie for Cambridge. But even at seventeen years the end of next half is yet a long way off, and English boys at that age are but boys still,—content for the most part to leave all care about their future in the hands of their guardians. Certainly no thought of their coming separation, no presentiment of the cares of mature life oppressed the spirits of this pair during their homeward journey.

It was five o'clock on a frosty December evening when they got out of the train at the quiet little station from which their home was reached. They knew they should not find any one to meet them, for the school had broken up a day sooner than was at first announced, and they had not cared to telegraph, as they rather enjoyed taking the people at home by surprise; and after having spent so many hours in a railway carriage the three-mile walk was pleasant.

Darkness closed in quickly after they left the station. December stars came out in the frosty sky, the frozen roadway rang under their elastic tread, and their glad young voices and gay laughter broke the silence of the quiet country in its winter night loneliness and stillness.

They were looking forward to a specially happy Christmas, for as soon as the new year opened the house was to be full of guests. But the great attraction for Willie had arrived already, and this was indeed the cause of his great eagerness to get home by the very earliest opportunity.

Loyal-hearted Will had never lost his boyish hero-worship of his cousin Geoffrey, though of late he had seen but little of him. For the last three years Geoffrey Withers had been a hard-working curate in one of our great manufacturing towns. During those years he had only twice had leave of absence from the scene of his duties, and then only for a few days at a time; and though on each occasion he had hastened to his old haunts to breathe for a little while the fresh wholesome air at the house of his former guardian, yet his visits had not happened during Willie's holidays.

One afternoon, indeed, they had spent together; for Geoffrey, on his return journey, made a circuit for the purpose of visiting his old school, where his name still appeared in golden letters among the former captains,—in honour of which distinction he obtained a half-holiday for the new generation of scholars. And of course he made them a little speech,

which was cheered by no one more vociferously than by his cousin Willie. But that was the only time Will had seen Geoffrey since the ordination of the latter.

Now, however, Geoffrey had been appointed to another post; and before entering upon his new duties, he had a fortnight free which he was to spend at his uncle's house. He had arrived the day before the school broke up, and Willie was anxious not to lose an hour more than he need of this visit.

Vincent, too, was looking forward with pleasure to the society of the prime favourite of his childish years. Maggie Martyn, who had been travelling abroad for more than a year, had come once more to pay a visit at her sister's house.

"Do you know," said Willie, "Geoffrey and Aunt Maggie were never with us at the same time since the first summer that you were here—the time you and I couldn't get on together, you know."

"I remember," said Vincent; "and I have sometimes thought we never should have got on together at all but for those two setting things straight between us. How you did hate me, Dig; and no wonder! I wonder how it would all have ended though?"

"I don't know how it would have ended, but I know it began miserably enough. If I should live to be a hundred years old I don't think I can ever again be so miserable as I was the day I killed you and then ran away. The first glimmer of hope

that came to me was with Geoffrey—I never can forget that to dear old Geof. When I first see him after an absence it always brings back to me the morning that he and Major found me in the boat."

"I'm awfully glad Geoffrey and Aunt Maggie are both to be with us this Christmas. Aunt Maggie is splendid for setting things going, you know. One always wants some one like that in a house full of visitors."

"I doubt the want would be very severely felt in any house that contained *you*," said Willie. "You *are* such a fellow for being at home with every one all at once."

"Oh, but there's no one like Aunt Maggie for getting up things and keeping them going, you know."

Then they fell into a conversation about some pastimes which they were planning for the holidays, and this lasted until they entered the grounds about their home. None of their *human* friends knew of their coming on this evening, but by some sense not given to humanity one true and loyal friend had divined it; and almost as soon as they had entered the grounds, Major, now in a well-preserved old age, sprang out upon them, less agile indeed than of old, but no whit less loving in his welcome.

"Hush, Major; lie down, you old darling," said Willie as he caressed him, for Major's deep bay of welcome would soon have betrayed their arrival. "I say, Imp, let us slip in through the library

window, up to our own room, and come down upon them all ready for dinner."

"All right," replied Vincent, and they turned their steps towards the glass door through which the library might be entered from the grounds. The crimson curtains were partially drawn; but it had not been very carefully done, for a space was left through which the flickering firelight glanced out pleasantly. The lamps had not yet been brought in. Years ago the room had been familiar to Willie just in that state. How often he had sat there alone at this hour on a winter evening in the old days before his stepmother came. He was a few steps in advance of Vincent as he put his hand softly on the door and looked to see whether there were any one in the room. Suddenly he turned round, and sweeping the slender Vincent before him, he hurried off in a state of mingled confusion and hilarity towards the main entrance to the house.

"Whatever is the matter, Dig?"

"Let's go in by the hall-door like respectable citizens. I feel the impropriety of entering the paternal dwelling like a burglar," said Willie chuckling.

"The scruple took you suddenly," grumbled Vincent; but Willie's iron arm was embracing him, and he had no choice but to go as it directed.

Their arrival was not long a secret. The bright eyes of a five-year-old maiden looking forth from the nursery window into the starlit grounds detected "two men coming up the steps," and with

a rapturous exclamation she ran downstairs to communicate to the household that "she did believe it was brothers."

They were warmly welcomed after this, and hurried immediately into the drawing-room; for though they had come a day before they were expected, it was not a day too soon for any one in the house.

There was scarcely any perceptible difference between Mrs. Withers's welcome to her own son and her greeting to her stalwart stepson. She took a motherly pride in both.

Maggie soon came in bright and pretty as ever, though somewhat less girlish. She was four and twenty years old now, and had travelled a great deal. Vincent kissed her rapturously, and Willie more shyly, but with no want of friendly regard. Then came the reverend Geoffrey, now richly bearded, and changed in expression and manner just so much as became his advancing years and the graver duties of his maturer life. There was a very comical look in Willie's eyes as he greeted the cousin he had been so anxiously looking forward to meet. Perhaps it was because he was so glad to see him.

Scarcely were these welcomings concluded when the sound of wheels outside announced the master's return; and Willie hastened to meet his father, followed, of course, by Vincent.

Under the light in the hall father and son stood for a moment with right hands closely clasped,

looking in each other's faces with a glad greeting, —the elder man noting proudly the growth and development of his son; the lad marking with a shade of regret how gray hairs had multiplied about his father's forehead, and had begun to mingle with the brown of his beard.

It was now almost dinner-time. The new arrivals must prepare for that family gathering, and a very bright and cheerful one it was.

With the dessert came in two smiling little maidens, sisters alike to Willie and to Vincent.

Baby Maud took at once to big brother Will, and honoured his invitation to eat figs and biscuits at his side; while five-year-old Katie showed a preference for Vincent's attentions.

"I know something," said that little lady, nodding mysteriously at Vincent.

"What is it, Katie?" inquired Vincent encouragingly, while Aunt Maggie endeavoured in vain to divert her attention by offers of sharing an orange.

"I'll whisper it to you," said the little maiden gravely; and climbing on Vincent's knee, she clasped her arms round his neck,—"I'll whisper it, because Aunt Maggie doesn't like it said loud. Aunt Maggie is going to marry Cousin Geoffrey, and there'll be a weddin', and I'll be a little bridesmaid. Florinne told me," she added by way of confirmation.

Katie's was a stage whisper. Aunt Maggie blushed crimson, and broke a biscuit into small pieces. Mr. and Mrs. Withers smiled mischievously. Geoffrey made an offer to gag the little chatterbox.

Willie went round and clapped his cousin on the shoulder vigorously. Vincent was the only one who seemed at all surprised at the intelligence. He looked inquiringly at every one in turn; while the child, delighted at the commotion caused by her announcement, began to chant rapturously,—

"Aunt Maggie's going to marry Cousin Geoffrey; Cousin Geoffrey will marry Aunt Maggie!"—her little sister chiming in with a refrain,—"Cuzzin Geffy—Aunt Mag; Cuzzin Geffy—Aunt Mag,"—with a delightful feeling that she was doing something mischievous, which yet was not to be visited with banishment or disgrace.

"I say, Dig, you didn't seem surprised to hear of this approaching wedding," said Vincent some hours later when they had gone to their rooms.

"Surprised! not I. I didn't need to hear it; I *saw* it, sir, through the library window."

The cause of Willie's hasty retreat when about to enter the house by the library was that he had caught sight of the pair sitting in the firelight, with hands clasped, looking in each other's faces as only lovers look.

That was a happy vacation. The old house was gay with young life from beginning to end of it.

The wedding did not take place until the Easter holidays. Willie and Vincent, of course, came home for it. They had had much consultation to devise a suitable gift to be presented jointly by them to both bride and bridegroom. At last they decided upon a handsome family Bible, for which they

designed an elaborately carved case in fretwork. On the upper side was a scroll, which displayed the initials of the pair in a monogram.

"And under the monogram we must have a motto," said Vincent when the work had proceeded thus far. "Antique letters filled in with gold will be very effective. What shall the motto be, Dig?"

"Let us take time to think of it," replied Willie. "I want to have a very suitable one. You know we can put it in the last thing."

In the evening Willie was for some time busily engaged in copying antique letters from a book on medieval illumination. When he had finished he handed the paper to Vincent.

"What do you think of the design? That seems to me about the most suitable motto for anything presented by you and me to that pair."

Vincent agreed with him as to the motto. So when the work was finished the scroll displayed in very beautiful antique letters the words, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."

THE END.







